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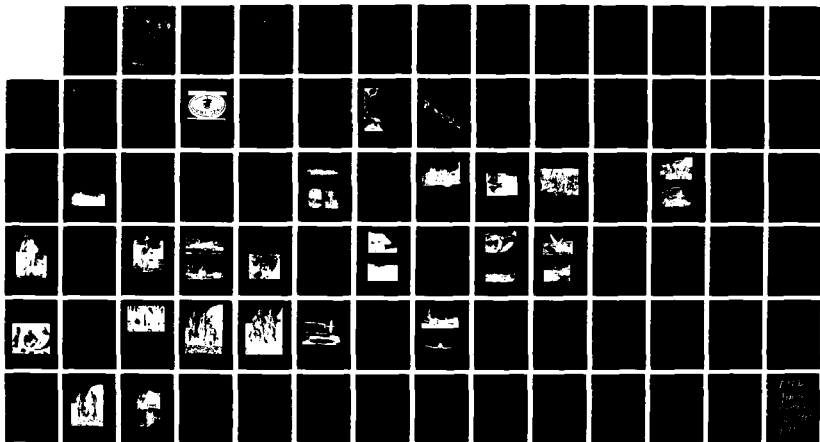
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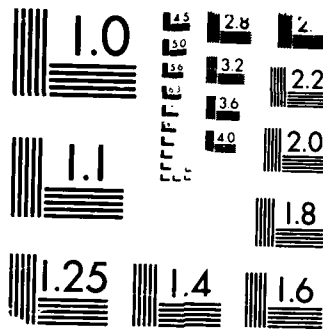
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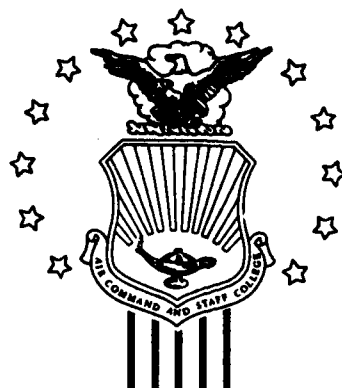
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STUDENT REPORT

U.S. MARINE AVIATION IN WORLD WAR II:
VMF 124 IN THE SOLOMONS

MAJOR JEFFREY A. KWALLEK, USAF 88-1515

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| 19 ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 124 was formed in 1942 to fly the new F4U Corsair in combat against the Japanese Zero to win air superiority in the Pacific air war. VMF 124 was highly successful in combat against the Japanese and attained decisive air superiority. The pilots of VMF 124 were, for the most part, very young and inexperienced with the Corsair. Their tactics and the superior performance and firepower of the Corsair spearheaded the critical Allied drive up through the Solomon Islands chain. This paper outlines the combat history of VMF 124 during the Solomons campaign to identify factors for the squadron's success against the enemy and to identify lessons learned for our generation today. We base our doctrine, and to some degree, our strategy and tactics on the results of those who have gone before us. This paper looks at some winning warriors of World War II who turned the tide in a critical air war, and shows how they did it. | | | | | |
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PREFACE

This is a history of Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 124, the first unit to fly the F4U Corsair in combat. American aviators had fought valiantly during the first year of the air war in the Pacific, but their aircraft were outmatched by the Japanese Zero. A new fighter was needed to defeat the Zero and win air superiority over the South Pacific. A brand new American fighter, the F4U Corsair, rose to meet that challenge. VMF 124 was formed in September 1942 to fly the Corsair and wrest control of the air over the Solomon Islands from the Japanese. Although these young Marine pilots went to war with an average of just 30 hours flight time in their new fighter, the warriors of VMF 124 rapidly developed into a highly potent fighting unit. The pilots and Corsairs of VMF 124 spearheaded the Allied effort to win air superiority in the Solomons, leading the way in that critical Pacific campaign.

This history follows VMF 124 from their initial organization and training at Camp Kearney, California, through their combat tour in the Solomons. It includes stories of courage and daring, almost miraculous survival accounts, great victories, and tragic losses. Like most histories, the story of VMF 124 contains humor, sadness, and important lessons from which to learn. For the author, a non-aviator, researching this history has been an illuminating and exhilarating inspirational experience.

The author is greatly indebted to several individuals for their support and assistance. Former VMF 124 members Colonel Howard J. "Mick" Finn, USMCR, Retired; Colonel Edmond P. Hartsock, USMCR, Retired; and Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth A. Walsh, USMC, Retired, all took the time and patience to respond to long letters from the author. Major Perry N. Coley, USAF, Retired, provided photographs he personally shot while he served as a Marine Corps combat photographer in the Solomons. The author is grateful to Ms. Lena Kaljot of the Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington, D.C., for her kind assistance in retrieving squadron war diaries and combat records from the archives. Special thanks go to Major (Lieutenant Colonel selectee) Thomas O. Jahnke of the ACSC staff for introducing the author to VMF 124 and Colonel Walsh, and for his enthusiastic support and encouragement throughout this project.

The author owes a special debt of gratitude to Colonel Walsh for his extensive contributions to this effort, including frequent written correspondence, providing photographs and addresses of other VMF 124 members, and lengthy telephone and personal interviews. Meeting and talking with Colonel Walsh was the highlight of this research project. Although four and a half decades have passed since he flew combat in the Solomons, Colonel Walsh still exemplifies that which is best in military leadership. The author feels greatly enriched and privileged to have worked with Colonel Walsh.

CONTINUED

The majority of photographs included in this paper are from Colonel Walsh's personal collection and were taken during VMF 124 training at Camp Kearney, California, and during combat tours in the Solomons. Major Coley provided additional photographs from the early days at Guadalcanal. All other photographs are from U.S. National Archives or USMC sources, and are so identified.

The three maps included in this paper were extracted from two USMC publications, Bougainville and the Northern Solomons, and Marines in the Central Solomons, both written by John N. Rentz shortly after the end of World War II. Both books are included in the Bibliography at the end of the paper.

A number of American and Japanese aircraft are mentioned and often referred to simply by a three or four character identifier, or by a nickname. The author has included aircraft names, identifiers, nicknames, and brief descriptions in the Glossary which precedes the first chapter. Some additional World War II terms and jargon are also included.

Finally, the "reference-by-number" system is used throughout the paper to cite data sources. Numbers enclosed in parentheses in the text refer to the Bibliography. The number which precedes the colon is the bibliography reference number of the source; the number(s) following the colon are the inclusive page numbers within the source. A double dash after the colon indicates the idea was found throughout the source.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major Jeffrey A. Kwallek was commissioned a second lieutenant in the United States Air Force upon graduation from St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, in May 1975. He served an operational tour as Missile Combat Crew Commander, Wing Instructor, and Wing Evaluator in the Minuteman III weapon system at Francis E. Warren AFB, Wyoming. In 1980 he was reassigned to the 1st Strategic Aerospace Division, Vandenberg AFB, California, where he worked current and future plans and programs. His last assignment prior to Air Command and Staff College was as Executive to the Director, Command Control, at Headquarters Strategic Air Command, Offutt AFB, Nebraska. Major Kwallek has been selected to remain at Maxwell AFB on the Air Command and Staff College faculty staff following his graduation in June 1988. He holds a Master's Degree in Psychology, Counseling and Guidance from the University of Northern Colorado.

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GLOSSARY

AMERICAN AIRCRAFT

- B-24: *Liberator*. Four-engine bomber, manufactured by Consolidated, Ford, and Douglas.
- B-25: *Mitchell*. Two-engine bomber, manufactured by North American.
- BENT-WING BIRD: One of several nicknames for the F4U.
- CORSAIR: Official name of the F4U; means "privateer," "pirate," or "pirate ship."
- DC-3: Commercial passenger aircraft.
- DUMBO: Nickname for PB4Y, an air-sea rescue plane.
- F2A: *Buffalo*. Single-engine fighter, manufactured by Brewster.
- F4F: *Wildcat*. Single-engine fighter, manufactured by Grumman. VMF 124 trained in the F4F prior to receiving the Corsairs.
- F4U: *Corsair*. Single-engine fighter, manufactured by Chance-Vought. Set world speed record in 1940. Finest fighter in the Pacific air war.
- F6F: *Hellcat*. Single-engine fighter, manufactured by Grumman.
- P-38: *Lightning*. Two-engine fighter (pursuit), manufactured by Lockheed.
- P-39: *Airacobra*. Single-engine fighter (pursuit), manufactured by Bell.
- PBY: *Catalina*. Two-engine patrol bomber flying boat, often used for air-sea rescue, manufactured by Consolidated, Boeing, Naval Aircraft Factory.
- PB4Y: *Privateer*. Four-engine patrol bomber, manufactured by Convair.
- R4D: *Skytrain*. Two-engine transport plane, manufactured by Douglas.
- SBD: *Dauntless*. Single-engine scout plane, manufactured by Douglas.
- SNJ: *Texan*. Single-engine scout plane, manufactured by North American. Initially used for training by VMF-124 before the Corsairs arrived.
- TBF: *Avenger*. Single-engine torpedo plane, manufactured by Grumman, Eastern Aircraft, General Motors.

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WHISTLING DEATH: Japanese nickname for the F4U.

JAPANESE AIRCRAFT

BETTY: Two-engine medium bomber, manufactured by Mitsubishi.

DINAH: Two-engine reconnaissance plane, manufactured by Mitsubishi.

EMILY: Four-engine flying boat, manufactured by Kawanishi.

HAMP: A type of Zero; single-engine fighter, manufactured by Mitsubishi.

OSCAR: Single-engine fighter, manufactured by Nakajima. Earlier fighter design, similar in performance to Zero.

PETE: Single-engine observation plane, manufactured by Sasebo.

VAL: Single-engine dive bomber, manufactured by Aichi.

ZEKE: A type of Zero; single-engine fighter, manufactured by Mitsubishi.

ZERO: Single-engine fighter, manufactured by Mitsubishi. The mainstay of the Japanese fighter force, and the finest carrier fighter in the world, early in World War II. Includes both the Hamp and the Zeke. The Zero was very maneuverable, but could not match the speed of the Corsair.

GENERAL REFERENCE

AA: Antiaircraft.

ACE: Fighter pilot with five or more air combat victories (or kills).

BOGEY: Unidentified aircraft.

CAP: Combat Air Patrol.

CHARGE GUNS: Load the aircraft's guns.

C.O.: Commanding Officer.

DD: Destroyer.

CONTINUED

DEFLECTION SHOT: Firing from a side angle.

DIVISION: Formation of four fighters.

LST: Landing ship for tanks.

LUFBERY: A circle of fighters flying in a tight turn.

MAG: Marine Aircraft Group.

MAW: Marine Aircraft Wing.

SECTION: Two plane formation; half of a division formation.

SKIPPER: Commanding Officer.

SPLIT-S: A fighter maneuver involving a half-roll and vertical dive.

THACH WEAVE: A defensive tactic for fighter combat developed by Navy Commander Jimmy Thach; fighters constantly crisscross to protect each other's tail from enemy fighters.

VMF: Marine fighter squadron.

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REPORT NUMBER 88-1515

AUTHOR(S) MAJOR JEFFREY A. KWALLEK, USAF

TITLE U.S. MARINE AVIATION IN WORLD WAR II:
VMF 124 IN THE SOLOMONS

Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 124 was formed in September 1942 at Camp Kearney, California. It was the first unit to fly the new F4U Corsair in combat--its purpose was to defeat the Japanese Zero and win air superiority over the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific. VMF 124 and its Corsairs entered the air battle at a critical period in the Solomons campaign, as the Allies were mounting a key drive to wrest the Solomons from the tenacious Japanese defenders. Air superiority was essential to success of the Allied operation; before the advent of VMF 124 and its Corsairs, the Japanese Zero dominated the skies over the Solomons.

After a very brief training period at Camp Kearney, the young Marine fighter pilots of VMF 124 deployed to Guadalcanal and the air war over the Solomons. The pilots, averaging just 21-22 years in age, each had less than 30 hours total flight time in the new Corsair before arriving at Guadalcanal. They rapidly acquired skill and experience, and became the spearhead for the Allied drive up the Solomons. The combination of pilot skill and superior performance of the new fighter made the Corsair the air superiority weapon in the Pacific. In just 7 months of

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combat, the warriors of VMF 124 compiled a record of 69 kills against 11 Corsairs and 3 pilots lost in combat. The Corsair proved itself in a variety of offensive and defensive roles and missions, including: fighter sweeps and patrols; bomber, reconnaissance, and air-sea rescue escort missions; close-air support of ground operations, and interdiction of enemy shipping.

The Solomons were key to both the Allied and Japanese war plans in the Pacific. The Japanese were determined to hold the Solomons and their stronghold at Rabaul, thereby threatening Australia and New Zealand. They had well established and defended bases and airfields throughout the Solomons, designed to thwart any Allied advance in the area. The long and costly fighting at Guadalcanal marked the start of the Allied drive in the Solomons and presaged the bitter campaign to follow. Air superiority was necessary to both the Allies and the Japanese, as it would determine the outcome of the campaign.

VMF 124 developed its air-to-air tactics to take advantage of the superior speed and firepower of the Corsair. Maneuvering against the agile Zero was avoided in favor of maximizing altitude and speed advantages. The Corsair proved to be much more rugged than the Zero and could take a lot of enemy fire and still fly and defeat its adversaries. The basic tactics centered on using the "Thach Weave" in two sections of two Corsairs each, per four ship flight. The Japanese did not seem to follow such a team concept and often engaged in head-on combat to attempt to offset the Corsair's speed advantage. VMF 124 pilots' skill and the armor and firepower of the Corsair generally turned those encounters into American victories. The combat records attest to the effectiveness of VMF 124 tactics. Their experiences provide lessons learned worth contemplating today.

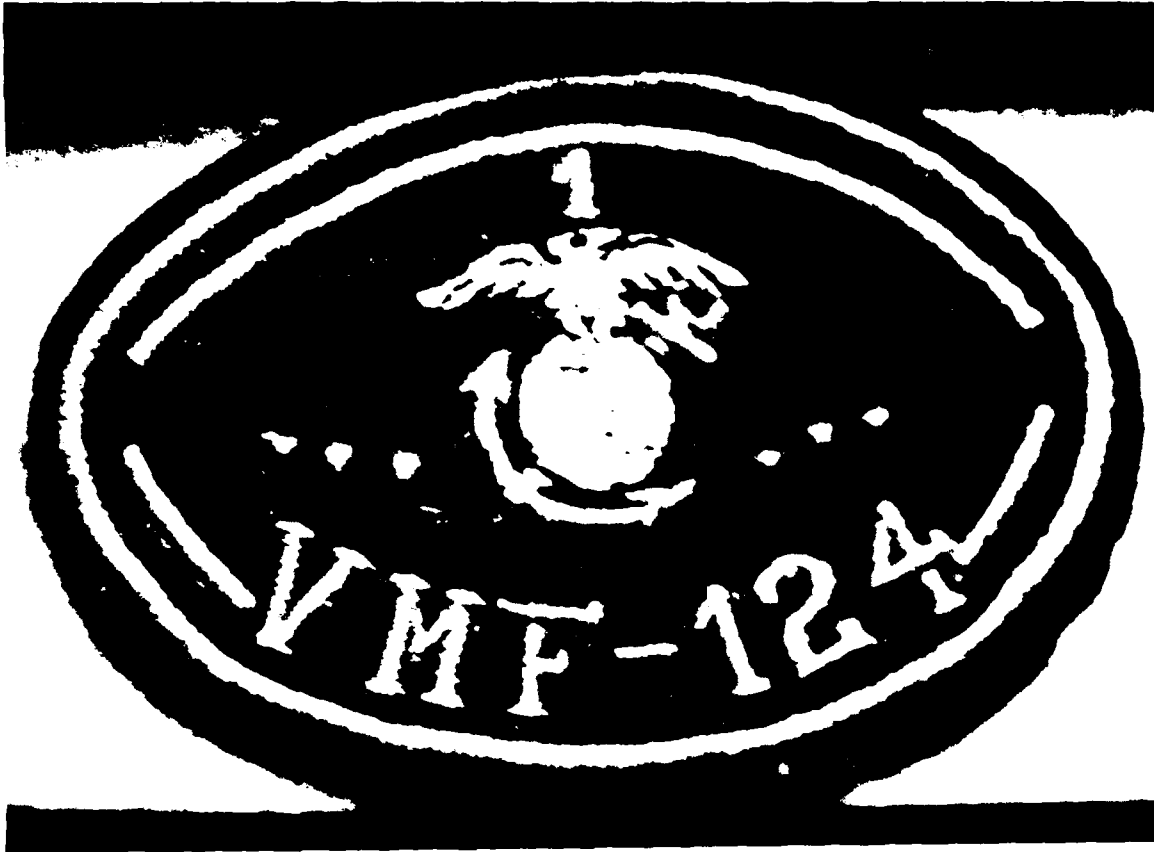


Figure 1. The Squadron Insignia of Marine Fighter Squadron 124.
(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to those courageous young men of Marine Fighter Squadron 124 who sacrificed their lives in the Solomons for their country and the cause of freedom.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

On 12 February 1943 a new air superiority weapon arrived in the Solomon Islands of the South Pacific. Described as looking "like a blue ball bat with inverted gull wings," this new weapon was the Chance-Vought Corsair, or F4U. (2:96) The F4U would quickly rise and soar above that unseemly description to stand as the "major nemesis for any type fighter plane" the enemy employed in the South Pacific. (2:97) Enemy pilots as well as ground forces soon gave "the blue ball bat" a more apt description when they named it "The Whistling Death," for the "unmistakable clean, sharp sound" the F4U made as it dove towards the enemy. (2:97) The combat prowess of the Corsair and the warriors who flew it led the Marine Air Arm as it successfully spearheaded the Allied drive through the Solomons.

Although many Marines flew the F4U in distinguished Pacific combat, Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 124 is unique. VMF 124 was the very first fighting unit to fly the F4U in combat, and did so almost immediately after arriving in the Solomons with its first Corsairs. From their arrival on 12 February 1943, through departure from the area the following September, the warriors of VMF 124 distinguished themselves in numerous missions against the enemy. Pioneering the F4U in combat, VMF 124 claimed 69 enemy planes destroyed against combat losses of 11 planes and 3 pilots; produced 3 aces, and a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient. (1:25; 2:254-257)

The author's aim in this paper is to examine the success of VMF 124 in the Solomons in order to derive lessons learned which may be of value today. This examination begins in Chapter Three by looking at VMF 124's combat records relative to tactics, victories, and losses. The balance of the paper discusses the physical capabilities of the F4U, and pilot experience and tactics. This information is then analyzed to identify lessons learned.

Chapter Two sets the backdrop for VMF 124's role in the Solomons campaign by providing a brief geographical description of the islands and a quick look at their strategic importance. This introduction is followed by a recapitulation of Allied and Japanese operations relative to the Solomons campaign, and is designed to sketch a general framework for understanding how VMF 124 fit in the "big picture." The critical importance of the Solomons is clear when framed in these strategic and historical contexts. VMF 124 became an important player in Allied

strategy and operations for the area. The following chapter will detail VMF 124's activities during the squadron's operations in the Solomons.

Chapter Three is intended to be a concise chronological history of VMF 124 at war in the Solomons. Drawn largely from squadron war diaries, written correspondence, and personal telephone interviews with members of VMF 124, this history will highlight key operations, and also attempt to convey a feeling for daily life in the squadron. Actual combat narratives, as reported by the pilots themselves, provide fascinating insights into their skill and daring, and impart a sense of "being there." The chapter closes with a look at the squadron's combat success and sets the stage for the balance of the paper, which will examine reasons for VMF 124's success to derive lessons learned.

Chapter Four examines performance and combat capabilities of "The Whistling Death" in an attempt to identify how the aircraft itself contributed to the combat success of VMF 124. Although the Corsair was a superb fighter from the outset, it was really the combination of man and machine that made it great. A number of modifications were required to perfect it for combat. The challenges of modifying the F4U, and employment in a variety of roles, reflect the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the men of VMF 124. The capabilities of the Corsair will be compared to those of its arch rival in the Pacific--the Japanese Zero. The F4U rapidly became the finest air superiority weapon in the South Pacific--this chapter will explain why.

Having demonstrated that the F4U was a superior air weapon, the question logically follows, "What about the pilots--how good were the men who flew the Corsair?" Chapter Five addresses that question by examining the training, experience and tactics of VMF 124 aviators. The information presented in this chapter is based largely on firsthand accounts from the pilots of VMF 124. Since this was the first Corsair squadron to face the Zero, special attention is given to specific "Corsair versus Zero" tactics employed by the warriors of 124. In addition, comments from several Japanese aviators who flew combat against the F4U are included to provide their unique perspective on what it was like to face "The Whistling Death."

Chapter Six concludes the paper with an analysis of the material presented in the preceding three chapters, with the goal of identifying and briefly discussing lessons learned. This is based on facts and data presented in the paper and the author's personal opinion. We base much of our doctrine, strategy and tactics on past experiences. By taking a good, hard look at what made VMF 124 a "winner," we may derive some lessons to help others be winners.

Finally, the Appendix lists the original VMF 124 pilots and their victories, highlights squadron aces, and recognizes the squadron warriors who gave their lives for freedom--to whom this paper is dedicated.

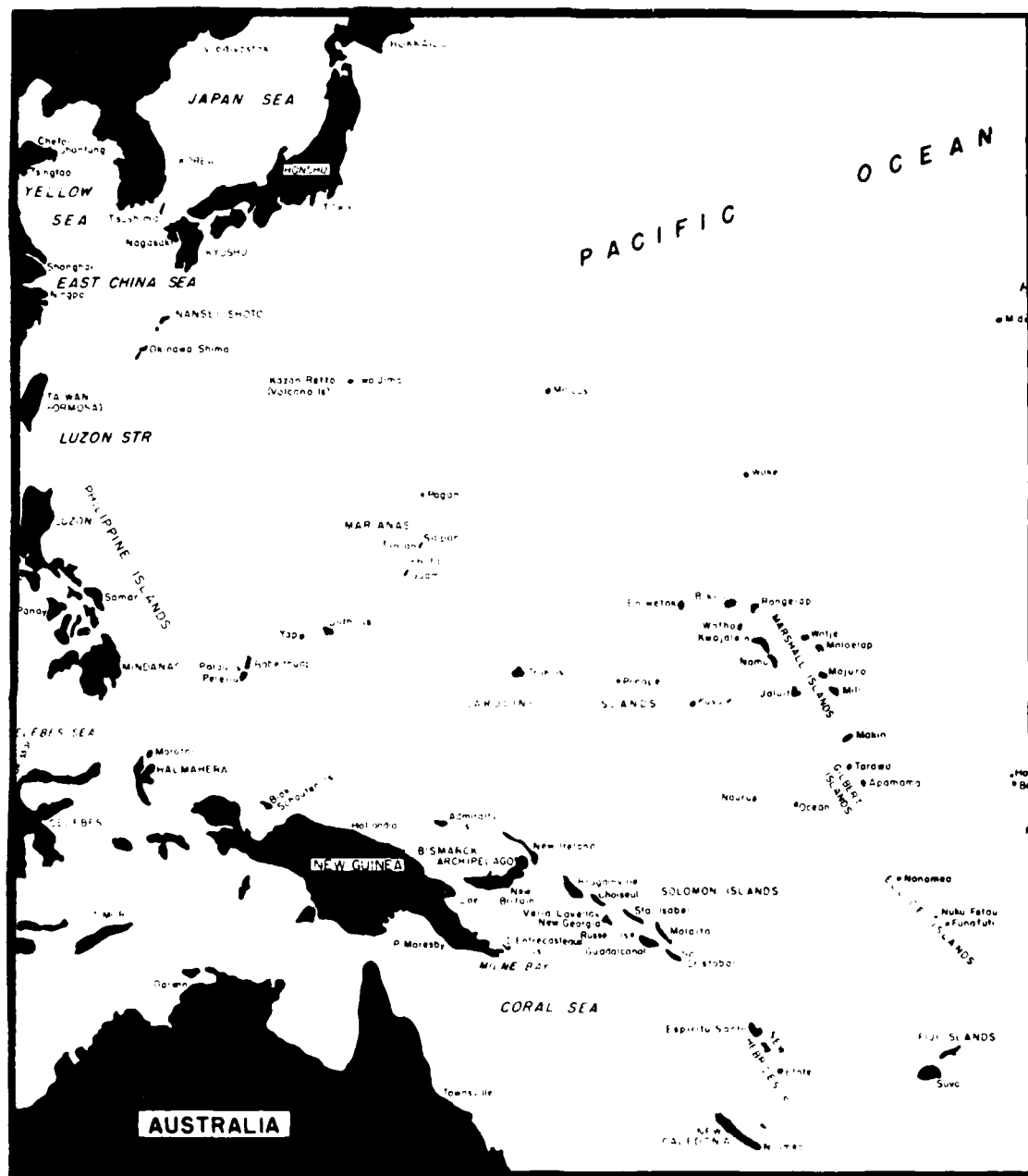


Figure 2. The Solomon Islands in relation to Australia and New Guinea.
 (Extracted from flyleaf map, Bougainville and the Northern Solomons,
 by Major John W. Rentz, USMCR)

Chapter Two

THE SOLOMONS AND THE ALLIED CAMPAIGN--A THUMBNAIL SKETCH

GEOGRAPHY OF THE SOLOMONS

The Solomons consist of a double chain of islands, 600 miles long. The two chains, laid out in a parallel formation, are situated between the New Hebrides to the southeast and the Bismark Archipelago to the northwest. Seven large island groups and approximately 30,000 small atolls make up the Solomon Islands. The largest islands are generally mountainous, very rugged, and covered by almost impenetrable jungle. (12:1-2)

Dominating the entire chain was The Slot (The New Georgia Strait). . . . During latter 1942 this long stretch of open water was one of the busiest arenas in the war. . . . For aviators, The Slot was the main battleground. Japanese air raids were intercepted as far north as possible, thanks to the superbly dedicated band of rugged individualists known as coastwatchers. Stationed on every main island from Guadalcanal to Bougainville, these Australians eluded the Japanese and radioed *Cactus* [Guadalcanal] the warning it needed to scramble its fighters. Hundreds of American and Japanese aircraft fell into The Slot or on islands around it. But this aerial arena had none of the foul odors or wretched sights of the jungle. To James Michener, then an aviation maintenance troubleshooter, this "home of great battles. . . is the most beautiful I know in the world. This may offend those who struggled in its skies. It may cause a shudder to those who fell into its waters and paddled their way on rafts to dismal islands. But during the war I flew The Slot, and so help me it was beautiful, passionately wonderful with craggy islands, spangled lagoons, and towering clouds. (18:28)

All the islands are south of the equator and the days are often stifling, with both temperature and humidity ranging into the 90s. (18:28) "Into this hodgepodge of islands, reefs, gulfs, lagoons and channels, American armed might moved against the Japanese aggressor . . . here the United States and its Allies would battle not only a human enemy, but also tropical heat, omniverous jungle and unceasing rain." (12:2-3)

STRATEGIC SITUATION

At the north end of the Solomons chain sits the island of Rabaul. Its strategic importance was recognized early on by the Japanese, who captured the island in January 1942. The Japanese quickly built three additional airfields to complement two previously built by the Australians, and improved the harbor for their fleet. They made Rabaul a heavily fortified military bastion, from which the Japanese moved to New Guinea and through the Solomons:

Throughout the months marking their southward advance, the Japanese developed Rabaul into the nerve center of their outlying. . . positions in the Solomons. As they prepared Rabaul as a springboard for the invasion of Australia, they took measures to protect their citadel from direct counter-action on the part of the Allies. . . they constructed forward landing strips at Buka, in the Treasuries, the Shortlands, and on Guadalcanal. They established garrisons on islands in the Northern, Southern and Central Solomons, and in the Bismark Archipelago to intercept any attacks directed at Rabaul before the attacker could reach his target. (12:3-4)

The Japanese forces at Rabaul, on New Guinea, and in the Solomons, seriously threatened Allied lines of communication and supply with Australia and New Zealand, and the freedom of both nations. (12:7; 6:19) "Rabaul, the bulwark of Japanese southern perimeter defenses, quickly became the key to Japanese operations and similarly became a consideration of prime importance to Allied planning." (12:8) The Allies developed a campaign against Rabaul with two main objectives:

First, it would shift the Allies from the defensive to a limited offensive designed to blunt and turn back the forward prongs that Japan had thrust southward, thus protecting the United States - Australia lifeline; second, seizure of Rabaul would not only deny its use to the Japanese but also provide a base for further Allied operations into the Marshalls, Carolines, Marianas and Philippines. . . on 2 July, 1942, the Joint Chiefs of Staff specified that Rabaul would be the principal target for Allied forces in the South and Southwest Pacific areas, and that moves in that direction would be undertaken immediately. (12:8)

BACKGROUND

"The war was nearly a year old before the United States, faced with a deficiency of aircraft carriers and assault shipping, could undertake the long over-water movements that marked our later operations." (12:9) Although the general strategy for the first year of the war in the Pacific was to "just hold on," new long-range goals for the Pacific were established by President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill at the

Casablanca Conference in January 1943. Those goals included: advancing from New Guinea and Guadalcanal through the Central Solomons to the Japanese fortress on Rabaul; the capture of Rabaul, thereby breaking the "Bismarks Barrier;" and, a thrust to Truk and Guam. (5:94; 15:263)

The Japanese, frustrated in their "failure to establish air supremacy over the Southern Solomons during the early battles for Guadalcanal dictated new, decisive action." (12:10) They made ingenious use of camouflage and concealment to hide their activities and built a forward airfield at Munda Point on New Georgia Island, and another on Kolombangara in the New Georgia group. The airfields were constructed at key strategic locations and heavily defended by ground forces. The Japanese planned to use the new airfields to conduct air strikes against Allied positions to the south, and to block the anticipated Allied advance northward to Rabaul. The Japanese plan posed significant threats to the Allied advance up the "Solomons Ladder." (5:94; 12:10-11)

SETTING THE STAGE

The bitter fighting for Guadalcanal ended 7 February 1943. With Guadalcanal secured, the Allied thrust through the Solomons to Rabaul was commenced:

. . . the Marine Air Arm was given a new and different role, that of spearheading the Allied drive up the island chain. Its squadrons were to carry a major load in the year-long offensive and its ground echelons were to play a dominant role in the campaigns which finally put an end to any semblance of Japanese air strength over the Solomons. There was little delay in the triphibious drive through the Solomons. . . the offensive to the northwest had begun. The enemy, by plan, was holding up along the Munda - Kolombangara front in the New Georgia group and intensifying airbase development back up the line to Rabaul. The purpose of the new Allied drive was to keep the Japanese back-pedaling and on the defensive. (2:96)

The Japanese forces ". . . strove to parry the Allied thrust into the Central Solomons. As a result of the crippling sea, air, and ground losses suffered in the Guadalcanal campaign, general operational policy for the Solomons area had been modified in favor of defensive, delaying tactics designed to hold up the enemy's advance on. . . Rabaul." (13:219) As this stage was being set in early February, a significant new player in the Allied thrust arrived in the Solomons--the first combat squadron equipped with a new air superiority weapon--the F4U Corsair. The Corsair first tasted combat with the enemy on 14 February, during a B-24 bomber escort mission to attack Japanese shipping in the southern Bougainville area. (2:97)

only eight enemy planes; there were no Allied planes lost. The absence of Japanese fighters was used as an opportunity to expand the range of Allied air operations, and focus on a key target--Munda. Allied air forces would raid Munda more than one hundred times during the next four months. Lieutenant Commander S. Yunoki, a Japanese gunnery officer defending Munda airfield, recalled the impact of those raids: "The dive-bombers and torpedo bombers made very serious attacks. Food and ammunition dumps were constantly destroyed. Runways were badly damaged by raids, but were usually fixed again within 48 hours." (2:97-98)

The drive through the Solomons continued, and was not significantly impacted by the TRIDENT Conference in May. Although the conference essentially reconfirmed the strategy outlined at Casablanca in January, it also altered the original plan to capture Rabaul:

. . . the advance along the coast of New Guinea and up through the Solomons was to be continued, and, by the capture of the Admiralty Islands, a wedge driven between the Japanese positions in New Guinea and New Britain which would isolate and neutralize Rabaul. The plan to capture this strongly held naval and air base was discarded as too costly. (8:409)

The strategy for the Pacific was readdressed during the August QUADRANT Conference in Quebec:

. . . two specific lines of approach towards Japan in the Pacific had been laid down. General MacArthur's advance in the Southwest Pacific was to continue in eastern New Guinea as far as Wewak; the Admiralty Islands were to be seized and the Bismark Archipelago neutralized; and, with Rabaul rendered impotent, a further move westwards was to be made step by step along the New Guinea Coast to the Vogelkop peninsula. . . in the Central Solomons, Munda, the linchpin of the Japanese defenses, had fallen on 5 August. . . . (9:83; 26:49)

"In view of the evident hopelessness of continued resistance on New Georgia, Maj Gen Sasaki [Southeast Detachment Commander], on 7 August ordered the gradual withdrawal of the forces defending Munda to Kolombangara." (13:220) "The main strength of the New Georgia defenders was now added to the forces available for the defense of Kolombangara, and Maj Gen Sasaki began an immediate reorganization of his troops with a view to launching an early counteroffensive." (13:221)

Although the Allies now controlled Munda, the Japanese still held three key islands in the New Georgia group: Kolombangara, Vella Lavella, and Arundel. The original plan (code named TOENAILS) was to invade Kolombangara immediately following Allied occupation of Munda. The situation had changed since the original plan, however, and the Japanese now had 10,000 troops dug in and ready to defend Kolombangara. Coastwatchers had also reported that the garrison at Vella Lavella consisted of only 250 lightly armed men. Admiral Halsey reevaluated the

plan and decided to completely avoid a protracted and costly blood bath by simply bypassing Kolombangara, and taking weakly defended Vella Lavella. (8:416-417) "This was the first instance of the deliberate use of the leap-frogging or bypassing strategy which had long been contemplated, and which from now on was to be generally used in the Pacific." (8:417) With Kolombangara successfully bypassed, the American troops went on to the next step in the "Solomons Ladder" and seized Vella Lavella on 15 August. (9:83) "The battle of Vella Lavella, as it was called, ended the campaign in the Central Solomons. Only Bougainville now remained to bar the way to Rabaul." (9:84) Arundel was invaded on 27 August, and finally taken 21 September, following a lengthy jungle defensive by the stubborn Japanese defenders. (12:127-129)

The Allied advance, and the deteriorating Japanese situation prompted Japanese Headquarters, on 15 September, to direct the evacuation of all forces from Kolombangara. (13:221) After more than a year of bitter fighting, the Allies had wrested control of the Central Solomons from the enemy and were ready for Bougainville and Rabaul.

Chapter Three

VMF 124 AND THE SOLOMONS AIR WAR

THE BIRTH OF VMF 124

VMF 124 was initially formed 7 September 1942. To put the genesis of the squadron in perspective, it is necessary to look back to the history of its predecessor and parent, VMF 121. VMF 121 had been involved in several months of training and exercises at New Bern, North Carolina, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor 7 December 1941. Two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, VMF 121 returned to its home base at Quantico, Virginia, for two days of combat readiness preparations and aircraft maintenance. On 11 December, VMF 121 departed with 28 F4F-3s for San Diego, arriving on 16 December. (24:1; 37:1)

The activities immediately following VMF 121's arrival at San Diego were apparently hectic as the F4F-3s were prepared for war. One of the pilots of VMF 121 who was to become a "charter member" of VMF 124 was Second Lieutenant Kenneth A. Walsh, USMC. He recalls those early days at San Diego:

Subsequent to our arrival at San Diego the "big picture" was awful confusing. In short, more time was spent on aircraft combat readiness (installation of self-sealing fuel cells, navigation equipment, etc.) when suddenly, the F4F-3s were transferred (to the Navy, I believe) and the pilots and ground crew dumped at Camp Kearney [in San Diego] on Christmas Eve--with no aircraft! Getting squared away at Camp Kearney is another story. . . but it was here that MAG-12 was organized (VMF 121 [was] the nucleus). Hence, the reorganization of 121 and the birth of 122, 123, and 124. . . the squadrons were deployed in numerical order soon as pilots and aircraft became available. For one reason or another, there was a spill-over of some pilots from one squadron to the others prior to deployment. For example, in my case, I had been assigned to all four squadrons prior to deployment with 124. None of the above squadrons or personnel were combat experienced. . . . (37:1)

On 7 September 1942, VMF 124 was the last of these squadrons to be formed from the original VMF 121. Under the command of Major William E. Gise, "the new squadron began operations at Camp Kearney with two SNJs,

and some time later received some old F4Bs, in which training began in earnest." (24:1) Although the squadron was formed and operating, the majority of its pilots, support personnel and equipment did not arrive until October. (38:1)

The 26th of October, 1942 stands out as a red letter date for VMF 124, and American combat aviation in general. On that day the first of the new Chance-Vought F4U Corsairs was delivered to VMF 124, making it the first Marine squadron to be equipped with the new fighter. (24:1) The F4U-1 was more than just a brand new fighter--to those who would fly it first, it was awesome:

Like thousands of pilots after them, the men of VMF 124 stood almost in awe of the Corsair. Its initial impression was one of size and power. Compared to the chunky little Grumman Wildcat, the F4U was huge--three feet taller and a ton and a half heavier. . . many pilots felt lost in the Vought's spacious cockpit. . . . (18:11)

"The new aircraft were obtained at Naval Air Station, North Island, San Diego, and for the most part, ferried to Camp Kearney by VMF 124 pilots . . . [which was] the individual's first flight in the F4U-1." (36:3) Eager to see what this new fighter could do, the pilots of VMF 124 began their training almost immediately. Walsh's log book records that he made his first flight in the F4U-1 on 31 October. (38:1)



Figure 5. One of VMF 124's first F4Us, Camp Kearney, October/November 1942.

(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)

The months of November and December were filled with activity for the new squadron. Colonel Howard J. "Mick" Finn, USMCR (Retired), recalls that the flight training consisted of formation flying and familiarization with the "Thach Weave." (34:1) Walsh summarized those two months, saying:

We really had about two months [November and December] to acquaint ourselves with each other, check out in the F4U-1 and endeavor to accomplish some training prior to deployment overseas. During this time our operational losses were four aircraft and one pilot, Lieutenant Lanyon. There was scarcely time for operational development of the F4U-1, much less the training of its pilots. We deployed with 29 pilots with an average of 20 hours flight time in the F4U-1. Some of the pilots fired its guns for the first time only after arriving in the South Pacific, and needless to say, a good many of the pilots had yet to learn how to fire the guns in conjunction with the gunsight and hit a target. Ironically, the operational capability of the F4U-1 and the proficiency of its original cadre of pilots, had to wait until the combat area was reached. (38:1)

As Walsh indicated, the squadron did not have ample time to really "break in" the new fighter prior to deployment for combat. In December they worked 25 days straight preparing their Corsairs, and on 28 December 1943, the squadron was declared combat ready. (18:12)

DEPLOYMENT TO THE SOLOMONS AND WAR

The main body of VMF 124 sailed from San Diego on 8 January 1943, aboard the U.S.S. *Lurline*. VMF 124 Commander, Major William E. Gise, took with him 27 officers, 232 enlisted men, 8 corpsmen and 1 civilian. These numbers actually represent a total of 29 pilots: Major Gise, plus 27 officers and one enlisted pilot, Staff Sergeant Troy M. Shelton, who later was commissioned a second lieutenant. (36:4) A small detachment (one officer and five enlisted men) accompanying the aircraft had already sailed from San Diego on 4 January aboard the U.S.S. *Kitty Hawk*. The main body arrived at Noumea, New Caledonia, on 22 January, where the squadron boarded the U.S.S. *Hunter Liggett* and reembarked for Efate (code named *Roses*), New Hebrides, arriving 26 January. On 27 January, the pilots and some key squadron personnel were transported by Marine R4D transport aircraft to Espiritu Santo (code named *Buttons*) in the New Hebrides, where they were placed on special temporary aviation duty. The majority of the squadron personnel later sailed from Efate to Guadalcanal aboard the U.S.S. *Thornton*. The pilots and F4Us arrived at Espiritu Santo with no ground crews, so Major Gise directed the VMF 124 pilots to individually ready their assigned aircraft for flight. (24:1; 37:2-3; 38:1)

ESPIRITU SANTO

Lieutenant Ken Walsh flew the first F4U at Espiritu Santo. He has a vivid recollection of the task of readying his aircraft and his subsequent first flight in the South Pacific:

Our arrival [Espiritu Santo] pretty well coincided with the U.S.S. *Kitty Hawk*. . . at last we pilots were again with our Corsairs! But there was a critical shortage of aircraft maintenance personnel; consequently, Major Gise ordered the pilots to ready their respective aircraft for flight--no easy task this. . . degunking, loading 2400 rounds of .50 cal ammunition, fueling, etc. Never will forget the job it was removing the gunk (a black substance) that covered the white star and other aircraft markings. Certainly, there was no race to do the job. . . it was hard work. Late afternoon, I considered my aircraft (No. 13) ready for flight and accordingly reported to Major Gise, who said, "Ken. . . show 'em what it can do!" And this I did. . . flight was flown on 29 January 1943. (39:1)

The two weeks following arrival at Espiritu Santo were extremely valuable to the pilots of VMF 124 as they made final preparations for deployment and combat at Guadalcanal. Some of "the bugs" were "ironed out" as two significant problems with the F4U were corrected at Espiritu Santo: (1) unbearable radio reception noise caused by ignition interference, and (2) inadequate pressurization of the ignition system at high altitudes. (38:1; 44:1) Walsh recalls the problems clearly--the ignition system pressurization problem was very nearly fatal for him. In his words:

The ignition system proved unreliable above 29,000 feet. Pressurization to the distributors was insufficient, consequently the spark would jump the gap and burn out the distributor points causing complete engine failure. (At this time, pressurization was provided only by the supercharger, later, [by] an air pump in each distributor housing.) Hence, on February 1st I put the first F4U in the "drink." I went down with the plane and had extreme difficulty freeing myself from the cockpit. . . finally free, I had barely the strength to inflate one half section of the "Mae West," which brought me to the surface. I would estimate I went down about 50 feet and doubt if I could have survived another five seconds under water. Shortly thereafter, I was rescued by a PBY piloted by Major Jack Cram, USMC. An attempt to salvage the plane was abandoned since it went down in something like 1000 fathoms! I decided never again to ditch the F4U, but would bail out instead. . . incidentally, consensus of opinion about bailing out was to roll into inverted flight and escape by pushing the stick forward. (44:1)

Just as significant as "ironing out bugs," the pilots were afforded the opportunity for some valuable additional training in their Corsairs prior to departing for Guadalcanal. Walsh recalls the average flight time and training of squadron pilots in the Corsair, "... the original cadre of 29 pilots deployed from Camp Kearney with an average of approximately 20 hours training in the F4U-1. Some additional training was accomplished at Espiritu Santo during the period 27 January - 11 February 1943; perhaps an average of 10 hours." (37:2)

THE FIRST TOUR OF COMBAT DUTY (12 FEBRUARY - 4 APRIL 1943)

The pilots of VMF 124 departed Espiritu Santo in 17 F4U-1 Corsairs early the morning of 12 February. Their destination was Guadalcanal (code named *Cactus*), in the British Solomon Islands. Some 560 nautical miles and four and one half hours later, they landed at "Fighter Two Airstrip" on Guadalcanal. Just two hours after landing, 12 of the F4Us took to the air again! Their mission--escorting a PBY "Dumbo" air-sea rescue plane 235 miles north of Guadalcanal to pick up two downed Marine fighter pilots. The mission was a success, particularly for Lieutenant Jefferson J. DeBlanc of VMF 112 and Staff Sergeant James A. Felton of VMF 121. Both aviators were picked up at Sandfly Bay on the island of Vella Lavella, in an area dominated by the Japanese. They had been forced to abandon their damaged fighters and parachute near the island of Kolombangara during combat action on 31 January. A coastwatcher had "taken them under his wing" until they could be picked up by PBY, 13 days later. Lieutenant DeBlanc was later awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions on 31 January. On the return flight to Guadalcanal, the PBY crew also rescued a photo reconnaissance pilot who had ditched his P-38 off the south coast of New Georgia. Returning to Guadalcanal after a highly successful first mission, the VMF 124 pilots landed at "Fighter One Airstrip," which was to be home for the Corsairs for the missions flown from Guadalcanal. (15:126; 20:27; 24:2; 36:7; 37:2-3; 42:--)

The very next morning, February 13, the pilots of VMF 124 flew the Corsair on its first bomber escort mission, escorting B-24s to bomb Kahili on Bougainville Island--300 miles up "The Slot" from Guadalcanal. ("The Slot," as it was called, is the New Georgia Strait.) Notes from a brief VMF 124 squadron history for 1943 indicate that during this mission, VMF 124 suffered its first casualty when Second Lieutenant Gordon L. Lyon, Jr., USMCR, collided in mid-air with a Japanese Zero. Second Lieutenant Harold R. Stewart was also shot down during that action. The Japanese lost three aircraft in the encounter. Walsh, however, is certain the squadron history is in error for 13 February--he recorded the bomber escort mission as "uneventful," in his log. There was no combat with the enemy on that date. The action recorded in the squadron history actually transpired on the following day, 14 February.



Figure 6. One of the very first VMF 124 Corsairs to land at Guadalcanal, 12 February 1943.
(Photo courtesy of Perry Coley)



Figure 7. VMF 124's first combat losses, Lieutenants Lyon and Stewart. Photos taken November/December 1943 at Camp Kearney.
(Photos courtesy of Ken Walsh)

Walsh recorded that a Japanese fighter did "look them over" during the 13 February mission, but there was no aerial combat. Other sources verify there were no combat losses that day; Lieutenants Lyon and Stewart were lost in combat the following day. Seven additional F4Us were flown from Espiritu Santo to Guadalcanal on 13 February, giving the squadron 24 Corsairs. (24:2; 36:7; 37:2; 41:1; 42:--)

The morning of 14 February began with another B-24 escort mission to Kahili on Bougainville--and the squadron's first taste of actual air combat. As Walsh recalled, ". . . this time the Zeros were ready and waiting. . . among the aircraft shot down were two of our Corsairs along with Lieutenant Lyon and Lieutenant Stewart." (37:2) The Japanese had indeed been well-alerted of the raid to Kahili Field on southern Bougainville. Approximately 50 Zeros were waiting for the raid, and in addition to the two F4Us, they shot down "two PB4Ys, two P-40s, and the entire top cover of four P-38s, with a loss to themselves of only three Zeros. . . this 'Saint Valentine's Day Massacre' was a painful blow to the Guadalcanal-based flyers of all services." (15:135; 36:7)

Walsh wrote that it was "about 25 February before the entire squadron had arrived at Guadalcanal. . . ." (37:3) The squadron history indicates that squadron activities during February and March included fighter sweeps, bomber escorts, strafing runs, and daily combat air patrols. During that time, First Lieutenants W. A. Franklin and R. L. Gately died at Guadalcanal as the result of operational crashes at the airfield. (24:2)

The brief squadron history for the early months at Guadalcanal provides a glimpse of life at Fighter One Airstrip. The following is extracted from a 1 December 1944 interview with VMF 124 members Majors William A. Millington and William E. Crowe:

On the first tour. . . VMF 124 opened Henderson's [Guadalcanal] new Fighter-1 [Fighter One Airstrip] living in tents, having no recreation and very little food. All personnel, officers and men, dug hasty foxholes between harassing raids by "Washing Machine Charlie." The situation was further complicated by a mixup in the shipping schedule, and the flyers had to wait four and one half weeks for spare parts and the majority of their ground echelon. With no parts, few men, and no facilities, the fact that they could keep going is a tribute to their ingenuity and fighting spirit, and also a commendation for the efforts of the Vought-Sikorsky representative [Mr. Malcolm Raffo, a civilian technical representative who accompanied this first squadron to have and use F4Us in combat]. After four and one half weeks, the balance of the men and required parts came in via destroyer and the situation improved immeasurably. Major Crowe states, [categorically]. . . that an average of 14 out of a total of 20 planes were kept in commission during the first . . . [tour]. Such a feat takes on added significance when it



Figure 8. VMF 124's original cadre of pilots, Guadalcanal, late February 1943; includes two Ground Officers.

(Photo courtesy of Perry Coley and Ken Walsh)

Top Row: Capt Joseph F. Quilty, Jr.; 2nd Lt James English; 2nd Lt William J. Bedford; Lt (jg) Carl R. Newman, USNR (Medical Officer); 1st Lt William E. Cannon; 1st Lt Thomas R. Mutz.

Middle Row: 1st Walter A. Franklin, Jr.; 2nd Lt Lee Langer; 1st Lt David C. McDowell; 2nd Lt William P. Spencer; 2nd Lt Kenneth A. Walsh; 1st Lt Dean B. Raymond; 1st Lt John D. Kuhn; 2nd Lt William M. Johnston, Jr.; SSgt Troy M. Shelton (NAP); 1st Lt Lloyd B. Pearson; 1st Lt Mervin L. Taylor.

Bottom Row: Capt Cecil B. Brewer; 2nd Lt George W. Kaseman; 1st Lt Gilman B. Rood; 2nd Lt Howard J. Finn; Maj William E. Gise (C.O.); 1st Lt William E. Crowe; Capt Lawrence A. Hart (Intell Officer); 2nd Lt Edmond P. Hartsock.

Absent for photo: 1st Lt John D. Hurst; 2nd Lt Benjamin E. Dale, Jr.

Hospitalized at time of photo: 2nd Lt Richard J. Webster.

Killed in Action, 14 Feb 43: 2nd Lt Gordon L. Lyon, Jr.; 2nd Lt Harold R. Stewart.

Killed in operational crash, 27 Feb 43: 1st Lt Robert L. Gately. (41:1)

is remembered that a strike protected by even 20 planes in those days was a blessing for the bomber people. In fact, VMF 124, along with some Army P-38s, provided escort for the first daylight bombing raid on Kahili from Guadalcanal. (24:4; 36:9; 39:1)

Relative to the first sentence of the squadron history extract just cited, Walsh states that there was enough food at Guadalcanal. Putting it in the perspective of a Marine inspector, Walsh said, "Food was sufficient in quantity and adequate in quality." (36:9; 43:--) He also recalled that even where there were no recreational facilities or equipment, American men always seemed to be able to come up with a baseball or something to use for recreation. (43:--)



Figure 9. VMF 124 pilots digging foxholes at Fighter One camp area on Guadalcanal, February 1943. Foreground, left to right: Capt Brewer, Lt Langer, Lt Spencer.

(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)

Early in March, a coastwatcher at Vella Lavella reported that a Japanese schooner with a detachment of soldiers was in a lagoon nearby, for the purpose of eliminating the coastwatcher and his native friends. First Lieutenants Kenneth A. Walsh and William J. Bedford took off from Guadalcanal in the predawn darkness on 3 March, heading for Vella Lavella for a surprise visit to the Japanese schooner. They left under

cover of darkness (to avoid detection during the transit of Japanese controlled territory) and flew by dead reckoning, at an altitude of 100 feet over the water. They arrived over the target area shortly before sunrise and located the schooner. Walsh and Bedford each made four strafing runs and fired more than 2,000 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition. They left the 1500-ton schooner damaged and listing. The coastwatcher later reported (undoubtedly with gratitude!) that the schooner sank. (20:27-28; 24:2; 42:--)



Figure 10. Australian coastwatchers and native scouts.
(USMC photo)

April 1943 literally began
124. The squadron war diary for
flights participated in a post
morning, 10:00, "A" and "B"
and 20:00, "C" and "D".
during the afternoon, a
bomber, lieutenant Raymond
McDowell, crashed with the engine
parachuted from his cockpit.

warriors of VMF
that "B" and "D"
- 1030 that
Capt 23 Zeros
"for-all,"
and one dive
lieutenant
was seen

Ken Walsh recalls the events of 1 April differently. He believes there may have been some confusion when the squadron war diary for April was written (apparently written in early to mid-May, several weeks after the pilots had departed for a rest and recreation tour to Sydney, Australia). (42:--) Walsh clearly recalls, "this mission was not a scramble, but a routine Combat Air Patrol (CAP). . . . I led that mission." (39:2) He recorded the events of that mission in his log for 1 April:

Walsh plus six (seven F4Us) CAP Russell Islands - Buraku Island. On station when relieved by six P-38's, [which were then] pounced by a superior number of Zeros (estimate 25). I immediately prepared for intercept and instructed all pilots in my flight: "Fly on MAIN fuel tank until expended then switch to RESERVE and return to base." (50 gallon reserve was adequate for return to base.) After completing a 180 degree turn, I observed the P-38s and Zeros in battle, which included a Lufbery circle intermingled, friend and foe, still. . . our formation of Corsairs was not detected by the enemy. . . the dogfight was now at 12 o'clock, a couple thousand feet above and within a mile of our formation. Prior to contact, saw two Zeros and one P-38 fall, including parts of same. Suddenly, a Zero, coming out of a dive, crossed directly in front of my aircraft within 100 yards. . . . I opened fire but lacked enough deflection for a kill; however, Raymond [Lieutenant Dean B. Raymond], my wingman, followed on the inside of the turn, had the proper deflection and shot the Zero down in flames. Now, all seven Corsairs engaged in the battle and fierce it was. . . . (39:2)

The rest of the story Walsh refers to notes that this was his first aerial combat experience. During the opening five minutes of the encounter, Walsh shot down two Zeros and had the canopy on his own Corsair blown off by a 20mm Japanese shell. The armor plating on the Corsair prevented the round from striking the back of his head. Before the fight was over, Walsh also shot down a Val dive bomber. Other squadron warriors added 13 victories to the VMF 124 combat record that day. (20:28)

On 2 April, "A" flight flew a two hour local patrol from 0930 - 1130. Lieutenant Johnston survived his experience the day before and was rescued--the war diary indicates he returned to base at 1130 on 2 April. (27:1) Walsh recalled that, "Bill Johnston was mad about getting shot down, and maybe even madder that he got so badly sunburned while he swam on his back to the Russell Islands." (43:--) From 1545 - 1845 that evening, "B" and "D" flights strafed enemy shipping and left one in flames. (27:1) Pilots of VMF 213 arrived the morning of 3 April to relieve VMF 124's warriors; at 1125, Major Gise led "B" and "D" flights in a scramble to intercept enemy aircraft, but no contact was made. (27:1)



Figure 11. VMF 124's Number Four Flight at Guadalcanal, February 1943. Left to right: Lt Johnston, Lt Walsh, Lt Raymond, SSgt Shelton.

(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)



Figure 12. Boresighting a Corsair's machine guns on Guadalcanal, Spring 1943.

(Photo courtesy of Perry Coley and Ken Walsh)

On 4 April, all VMF 124 pilots departed for Efate and Sydney, Australia for some rest and recreation. The ground crews remained behind to service aircraft for VMF 213. On 8 April, VMF 124 was transferred from the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing to the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. On 13 April, VMF 124's PFC Robert M. Whitefield died from burns sustained early that morning while he stood near parked airplanes, into which a pilot from another squadron crashed. Following the rest and recreation tour at Efate and Sydney, the pilots returned to Guadalcanal on 10 May. (24:2-3; 27:2)

THE SECOND TOUR OF COMBAT DUTY (10 MAY - 18 JUNE 1943)

When the pilots returned to Guadalcanal on 10 May, they found living conditions had improved: Quonset huts had replaced the tents, there were some movies and games for the men, and new matting had been placed on the runway. (24:4; 36:12) Undoubtedly, the improvements were appreciated, but the warriors of VMF 124 probably found little time to enjoy them--they were kept very busy throughout the rest of May. The squadron war diary for May shows that every day following the pilots' return was filled with action, including: "Knucklehead patrols" (Knucklehead was code name for the Russell Islands area), task force cover, local patrols, photo escort and strafing escort missions, fighter sweeps, and scrambles to intercept enemy aircraft. (28:1-4)

Twenty Zeros appeared near New Georgia on May 13 after their installations at Munda and Kolombangara had been shelled during the night. A large fighter screen from Henderson (on Guadalcanal) intercepted and batted down 16 of them. Fifteen of the kills were by pilots of VMFs 124 and 112. . . three were shot down by tobacco-chewing Kenneth A. Walsh, once a flying corporal and now a first lieutenant who became one of the high-scorers of the mid-Solomon's battle. (2:104)

Those three kills made Walsh the first ace (five enemy aircraft shot down) in VMF 124, and also, the first ace in the F4U Corsair. (20:28) VMF 124 suffered a severe blow during that battle however, when it lost squadron commander, Major William E. Gise. The war diary indicates Major Gise led 15 Corsairs in a scramble intercept mission. Contact with the enemy was made over the Russells, where in a fierce battle, Major Gise was shot down. (28:1-2) Walsh provided a personal sketch of the kind of leader Major Gise was, and the vital contributions he made to the success of VMF 124:

. . . VMF 124 was the first F4U Corsair squadron deployed for combat. . . the first to challenge the enemy in combat--air combat: intercept, bomber escort, and fighter sweeps. It necessarily established operational procedure for both ground and air. . . and doctrine for air combat, thus a little bit easier for other squadrons to follow. And its first skipper, Major Gise. . . his leadership and keen interest in every

aspect--aircraft, equipment, and individual personnel--fostered success of the original Corsair squadron, and got VMF 124 to Guadalcanal in February 1943, perhaps a month or two ahead of schedule; certainly, if it wasn't for Bill Gise, the original cadre could not have been ready for Guadalcanal 12 February 1943. He got us there and through the first tour of combat duty, 12 February - 4 April. Just a few days after commencing our second tour of combat, 10 May - 18 June, he was killed in action during a fierce (dogfight) battle in the vicinity of the Russell Islands on 13 May 1943. (39:1)

Captain Cecil B. Brewer, the squadron executive officer, became the temporary squadron commander, and Captain Joseph F. Quilty, Jr., became the new executive officer for the squadron. During the action over the Russells on 13 May, Lieutenant Benjamin E. Dale, Jr., was shot in the foot and bailed out over Lunga Point. It was a month of activity--during the 20 days of combat flying in May, 21 pilots of VMF 124 averaged nearly 29 flying hours each. (24:3; 29:2)

June began with the transfer of VMF 124 from Marine Aircraft Group 12 to Marine Aircraft Group 11. Operational activities for the month logged in the war diary include: local patrols; Russell Islands patrols; escorting SBDs and TBFs to Kahili and Choisel; scrambles to intercept over the base, Malaita and Tulagi; escorting PBVs to rescue downed pilots; escorting B-25s to Vila; and, ferrying new F4Us.

Highlights from the war diary include the 5 June mission escorting SBDs and TBFs from the Russell Islands to Kahili. The squadron war diary records that during that mission, Lieutenant Ken Walsh shot down two enemy aircraft--one Zero and one float plane. Lieutenant Dean B. Raymond also shot down one Zero. Lieutenant Thomas R. Mutz was wounded during the action and safely landed back at the Russells after "splashing" (shooting down) one Zero himself. On 10 June, while flying an intercept over Malaita, Lieutenants William E. Crowe, Mervin L. Taylor and Howard J. Finn spotted three Bettys (enemy bombers). Crowe was credited with shooting down two of the bombers and Finn shot down the third. Both Crowe and Finn were on their way to becoming Corsair aces. On 11 June, eight VMF 124 pilots and their Corsairs flew escort for a PBV rescue mission to pick up stranded pilots. During a scramble over the base on 16 June, Captain Crowe experienced engine failure and made a dead stick landing, with no damage to his Corsair. Lieutenant Finn was the only pilot to make contact with the enemy--and contact the enemy he did, shooting down a Zero and a dive bomber! On 17 June all pilots departed Guadalcanal for Efate and a rest and recreation tour. On 26 June, nine new officers joined VMF 124, including a new squadron commander, Major William H. Pace. Major Pace was skipper of VMF 124 for only a short while. He was reassigned as squadron commander of VMF 214 on 12 July, and killed in action over the Russells on 7 August 1943. On 28 June, Lieutenant Mutz rejoined the squadron--he was wounded in combat 5 June and evacuated 7 June. (15:433, 457, 461; 29:1-4; 36:15)



Figure 13. Mr. [illegible]
of VMF 124, [illegible]

Mr. [illegible], first command [illegible]
the [illegible], by [illegible]
[illegible]

The first few days of July were spent ferrying F4Us from New Caledonia to Espiritu Santo. From 4 through 6 July, squadron pilots departed on DC-3s for rest and recreation trips to Sydney, Australia. On 14 July, VMF 124 received a new squadron commander, Major William A. Millington. As pilots returned from their rest and recreation tour, seven new officers joined the squadron (20 July). Although the pilots of VMF 124 enjoyed a brief respite from combat, the enemy was not resting:

The Japanese air and surface forces had been far from idle during this period. A strong group of destroyers, attempting to retrieve the situation in Kula Gulf, was intercepted by a U.S. force the night of 5/6 July and driven off with severe losses. Again on the night of 12/13 [July], our ships encountered an enemy force off Kolombangara and put them to flight. A plane vs. ship action in Vella Gulf on the 19th inflicted further serious damage, and Munda was hopelessly cut off from all effective support. (5:98)

THE THIRD TOUR OF COMBAT DUTY (28 JULY - 7 SEPTEMBER 1943)

VMF 124's third and last tour of combat duty began with a B-25 escort to Webster Cove on Kolombangara Island on 29 July. The next day brought another bomber escort mission--this time, B-24s to Kahili on Bougainville. July ended with a local patrol on the 31st. (30:3-4)

The morning mission on 1 August foretold of things to come for the squadron, when they flew task force cover for the invasion of the Rendova - Munda area. They would soon be operating from the Munda airstrip themselves. No contact with enemy aircraft was made during that mission. Shortly after noon, VMF 124 pilots escorted bombers to hit Kahili Airfield. On 2 August, VMF 124 pilots escorted photo planes early in the morning, and bombers to Kolombangara Island that afternoon. A successful strafing mission to the Shortlands - Poporang - Alu Islands area on 4 August resulted in two Petes destroyed, as well as six to nine float biplanes destroyed on the water. Three barges, including one personnel carrier barge were strafed, and eight fires counted. (31:2-3)

"Munda fell on 5 August after an extended period of bitter jungle fighting. . . during this five weeks' operation, our [Allied] aircraft had shot down a staggering total of enemy planes: 259 fighters, 60 bombers, 23 dive bombers, and 16 float planes." (5:98) "Nine days after Munda fell on 5 August '43, VMFs 123 and 124 were operating from the strip built by the Navy's Seabees." (3:46)

Squadron activities through 11 August included: PBY escorts to pick up downed pilots; local high altitude patrols; escort missions for photo planes, DC-3s, bombers and TBFs; task force cover missions; and, scramble intercepts. During a bomber escort mission to Kahili Field



Figure 14. Major William A. Millington, at Munda, August 1943. Major Millington was skipper of VMF 124, 14 July 1943 - 23 March 1945.
(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)



Figure 15. Corsair taxiing on Munda Airstrip, August 1943.
(USMC photo)

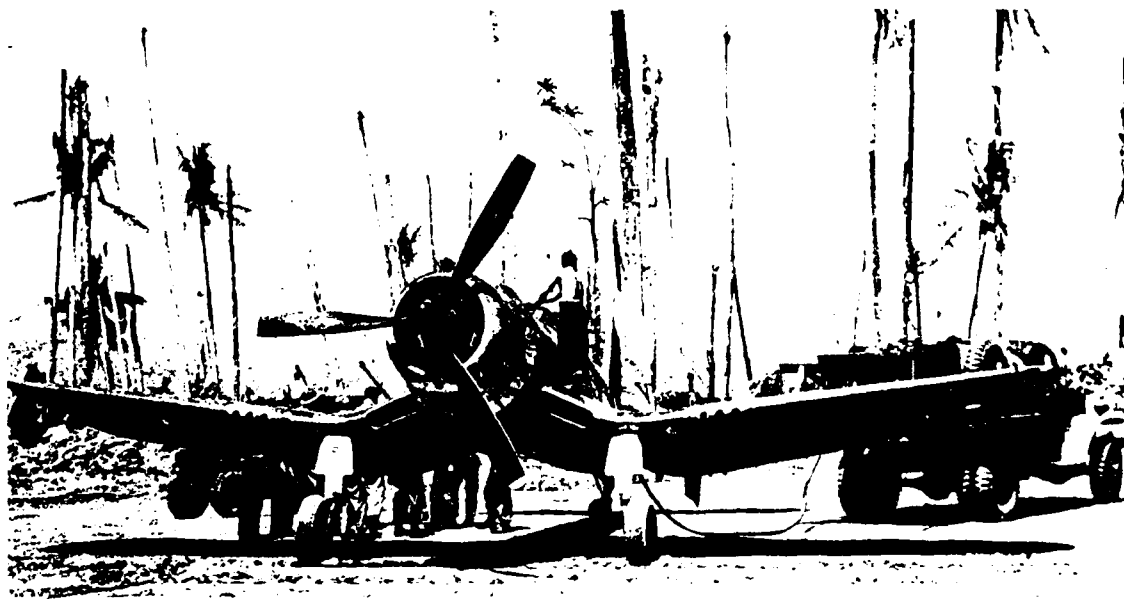


Figure 16. Refueling Corsair at Munda, August 1943.
(U.S. National Archives)

on 12 August, Lieutenants Walsh and Johnston made contact with the enemy over Choisel. Walsh was credited with shooting down two Zekes (Zeros) and one probable. Lieutenant Johnston was credited with shooting down one Zeke. During a strafing mission on 13 August, Lieutenant Langer made a forced water landing north of Vanganu Island. He was spotted early the next morning by Captain William E. Cannon while escorting a PBY search for Lieutenant Langer. That afternoon (14 August), VMF 124 pilots and Corsairs flew to Munda Airfield, New Georgia, for temporary duty. That same day, VMF 124 pilots flew the first patrol from Munda by any Allied squadron. (31:3-8)

The two weeks spent at Munda were to be very austere for VMF 124 pilots, harkening back to those early days at Guadalcanal. A description from the squadron history conveys the atmosphere of Munda: "... with no ground personnel whatsoever to help out. The coral field, having had it's shell-pocked surface layed over by Seabees, was not 'too rough.' Furthermore, additional shell craters alongside the field, [near] where the pilots slept, eliminated the necessity of digging foxholes. . . ." (24:4)

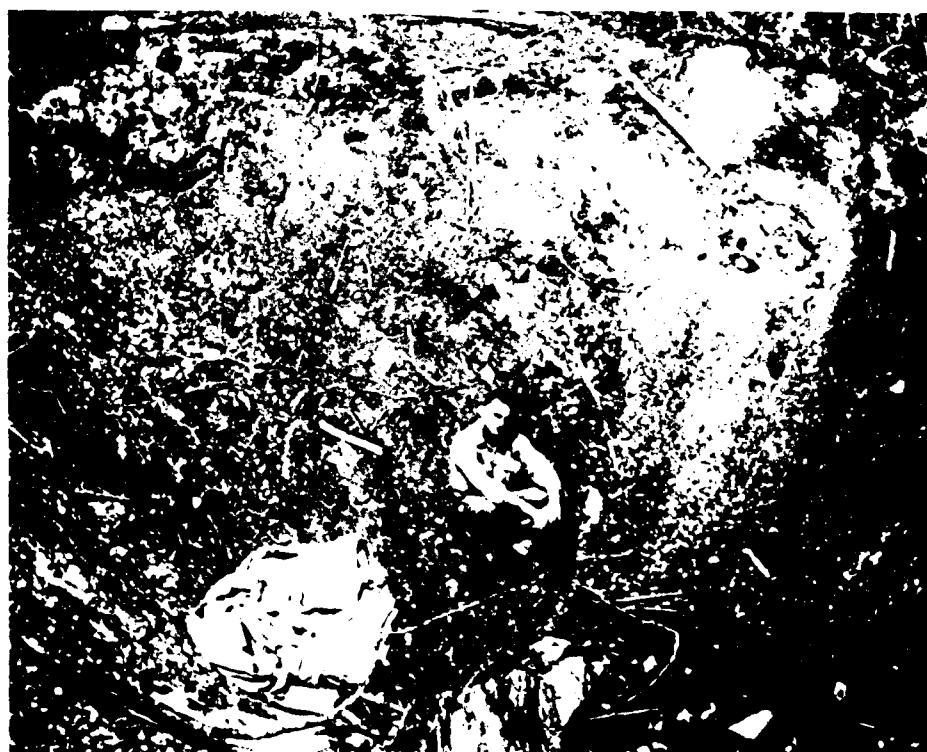


Figure 17. Lt Ken Walsh in bomb crater adjacent to runway on Munda. Crater made by Allied bombing during Japanese occupation of island.

(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)

The Allied strategic position greatly improved with the taking of Munda, and opened the door for key operations to follow:

With the arrival at Munda. . . on 14 August, our whole position in the South Pacific was greatly strengthened. The Japanese, however, still had a good airfield and a garrison estimated at ten thousand men on Kolombangara. . . the command decided to bypass Kolombangara and strangle it by seizing Vella Lavella, not far to the northwest across Gizo Strait, and Arundel Island, nearly abutting it to the south. . . . Vella Lavella . . . landing was accomplished 15 August. . . fighter cover from the recently acquired fields on New Georgia beat off four enemy bomber attacks during the day, and by 1530 in the afternoon the Marines had set up beach defenses and the Seabees had begun construction of an airstrip. (5:98-99)

August 15th was another red letter day for VMF 124 combat success. During the morning mission over the Vella Lavella area, 7 VMF 124 pilots shot down 10 enemy aircraft. Captain William E. Cannon and Second Lieutenant Troy M. Shelton shot down two Zekes each; First Lieutenant Howard J. "Mickey" Finn, two Vals; Captains William E. Crowe and Wallace E. Sigler, and First Lieutenant Thomas R. Mutz each shot down one Zeke; and, First Lieutenant Warren P. Nichols shot down one Val. Although the war diary records no combat losses that day, Captain Dean B. Raymond and First Lieutenant William M. Johnston, Jr., collided on take off during an afternoon scramble. Raymond suffered only superficial burns to one arm, but Johnston suffered severe head lacerations and was evacuated to Guadalcanal for treatment. (31:8-9)

Walsh provides a vivid account of how VMF 124 participated in the 15 August afternoon action:

The mission on 15 August was Combat Air Patrol. . . in the vicinity of Vella Lavella, 40 miles northwest of Munda and 180 miles from Guadalcanal. I was the leader of an eight plane flight launched from Munda to provide air support for our Naval and Ground Forces. Of the eight aircraft launched, five arrived on station. Shortly after communication was established with radar control (one of the DDs [Navy destroyers] operating with the landing force) it was reported that enemy aircraft were closing-in. This developed to be a formation of approximately 30 aircraft--a combination of fighters and dive bombers--who presently commenced their attack. During the ensuing battle I shot down one Zero and two Vals. On one particular occasion during this melee, I was able to maneuver my Corsair in position below-rear of nine dive bombers and managed several long bursts of fire into the enemy formation. Two Vals fell burning. However, my vantage wasn't long before a Zero tailed-in on me and scored numerous 20mm hits; one 20mm shell exploded in my starboard wing fuel

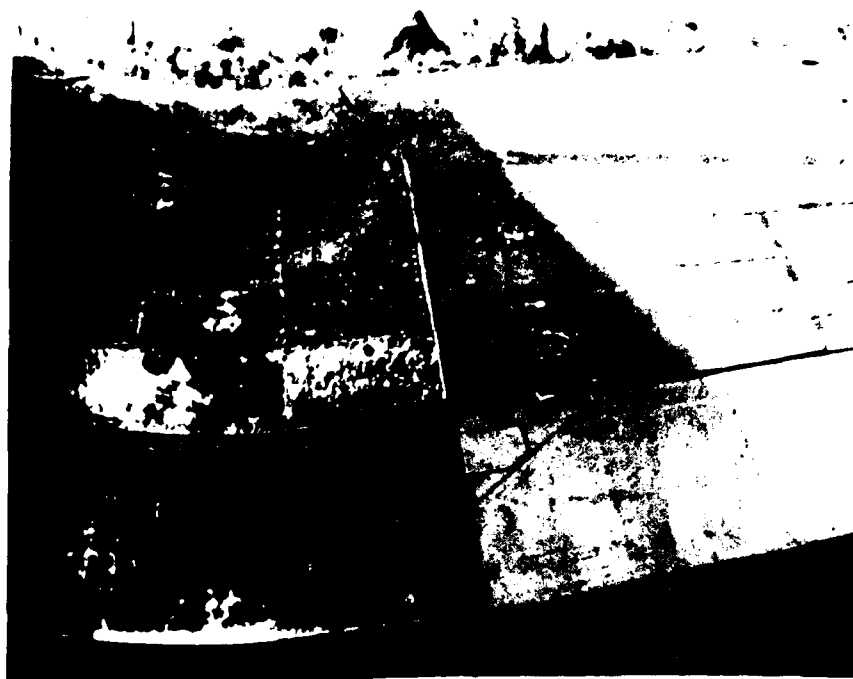


Figure 18. Right wing of Walsh's F4U, showing entry holes of Zero's 20mm and 7.7mm fire, 15 August 1943.
(Photo courtesy of Perry Coley and Ken Walsh)



Figure 19. Front edge of right wing of Walsh's Corsair, showing exit holes through wing and wing fuel tank.
(Photo courtesy of Perry Coley and Ken Walsh)

tank. Still, I was able to take evasive action and return to Munda. My aircraft was so severely damaged by this gunfire that it was beyond repair, but it did get me back. . . to fly another day. [Walsh was able to "fly another day," but his Corsair was so badly damaged it was beyond repair and had to be junked.] On this mission, more significant than the destruction of three enemy aircraft, was being able to attack the Val formation before they commenced an attack on our shipping or beachhead. They were in the target area. . . a DD who. . . confirmed this action [reported]. . . the remaining Vals aborted their mission. . . . (40:1)

On 17 August, routine patrols, alerts, and task force cover missions were accomplished, despite sporadic shelling of the Munda airfield and camp area throughout the day. The airfield and camp area were again shelled the following day, as VMF 124 pilots continued their daily mission support. Perhaps the shelling of their airfield and camp generated an extra measure of vengeance in the pilots. The afternoon of 20 August a strafing mission was conducted in the Shortlands - Poporang area. The war diary for August provides the following account:

The coasts of Shortlands and Poporang were strafed. Largest concentration of fire was centered on bivouac area (Capo Capanna). One float biplane was destroyed on the water by Brewer and Wardle. Two large fires and one small fire were observed. Two bleary eyed bastards in a small boat were blasted to bits by Bedford. All planes returned to base. Quilty was hit by AA, no serious damage. (31:10)

On the morning of 21 August, VMF 124 pilots again flew a mission above the Vella Lavella area, which:

. . . provided ample excitement for the fighter pilots, both on defense and offense. Captain William Crowe and Lieutenant Thomas Mutz were separated from their Vella patrol and climbed to meet an oncoming Jap raid of 130 twin-engine Bettys and fighters. They jumped the back of this armada and rode it down to its target at Vella Lavella. Fighting through a screen of friendly flak and enemy tracers, Crowe and Mutz downed four planes between them before pancaking their riddled Corsairs at Munda. (2:111)

That afternoon, Lieutenant Walsh shot down yet another Zeke over Vella Lavella. (31:10)

The action did not slow down for VMF 124. The squadron flew routine patrols until 23 August, when the pilots scrambled to intercept a reported bogey over the Vella Lavella area. The results of that morning's action were five Zekes shot down, plus two probables. Captain Cecil B. Brewer and Lieutenants Edmond P. Hartsock and William J. Bedford were credited with one Zeke each, while Lieutenant Ken Walsh

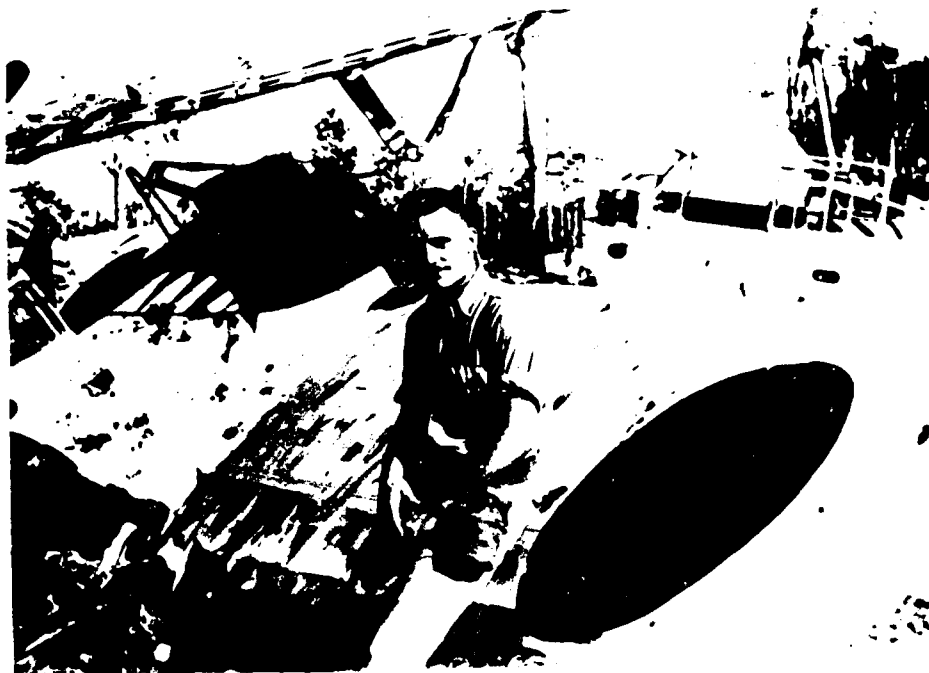


Figure 20. Lt Ken Walsh leans against downed Zero on Munda, August 1943. Walsh was an ace four times over, with 20 kills over the Solomons.

(Photo courtesy of Perry Coley and Ken Walsh)



Figure 21. Munda Airstrip, August 1943.

(Photo courtesy of Perry Coley)

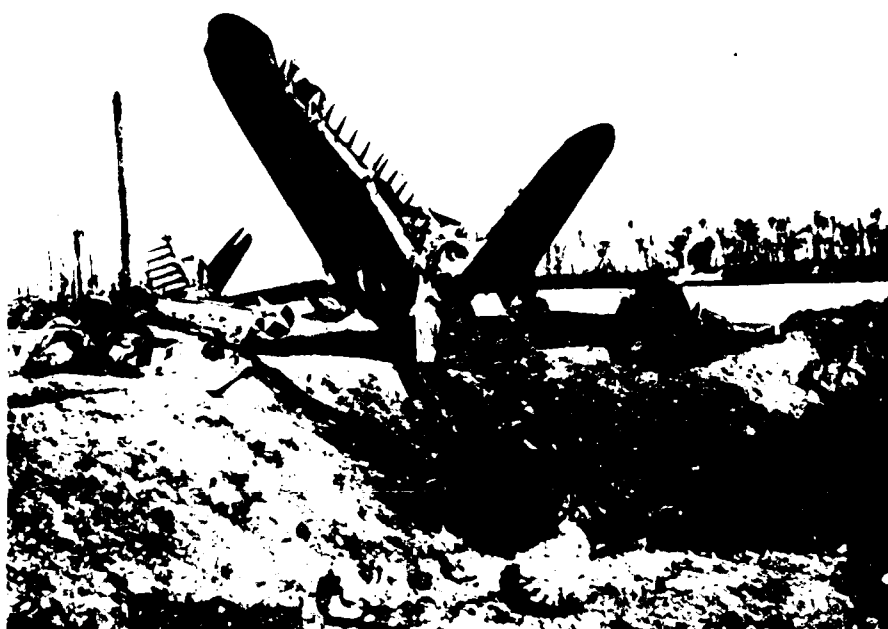


Figure 22. Corsair and Japanese Zero wreckage adjacent to Munda Airstrip, August 1943.
(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)



Figure 23. VMF 124 Operations and Ready Tents, Munda, August 1943.
(Photo courtesy of Perry Coley and Ken Walsh)

shot down two. In addition, Walsh and Bedford each tallied a probable Zeke kill. On 24 August, Lieutenant Hartsock and Lieutenant John C. Kuhn each scored another Zeke shot down during an interception mission. Misfortune struck the squadron early that afternoon, when Lieutenant H. H. Harter was killed instantly in a take off crash. Temporary duty at Munda was completed 25 August, and the squadron returned to Guadalcanal 25 - 27 August. (31:11-12)

On 30 August, VMF 124 escorted B-24s to Kahili on Bougainville Island. Lieutenant Walsh provided a detailed account of the action:

The mission on 30 August was Bomber Escort (B-24s) to Kahili Airdrome, Bougainville--300 miles northwest of Guadalcanal. I was part of the fighter escort. As usual, rendezvous with the bombers was accomplished enroute to target. When approximately half the distance to Kahili, my aircraft supercharger failed; however, the locale afforded the opportunity to land at Munda and replace my aircraft with one which proved to be readily available on "scramble alert." This was accomplished within ten minutes (thanks to one Major Jim Neefus, who not only authorized this exchange of aircraft, but drove me in his jeep to the hot-spot, and of four Corsairs on alert, said, "take your pick!"). Again airborne, I proceeded on a direct course, with maximum climb power, to Kahili (the B-24s would proceed past Kahili before turning southeast in order to make the bombing run). I calculated that the time loss in replacing my aircraft would balance out, which proved to be correct. Reaching an altitude of 30,000 feet, I approached Kahili about the same time our B-24s commenced the bombing run. My position and altitude proved most advantageous. I tailed-in behind the top cover, of what later was reported to be approximately 50 Zeros, and destroyed 2 Zeros in the immediate vicinity. Later, during the ensuing battle, approximately 70 miles southeast of Kahili, I shot down two additional Zeros before a formation of Zeros shot me down--following a P-39 which they set afire and whose pilot I observed to bail out. . . and a B-24 with no survivors. This mission was considered successful. The B-24s made an effective run "on target" and this was the purpose. But not without losses: We lost two bombers and seven fighters. I crash landed in the sea off Vella Lavella and was rescued by personnel who reached me with a Higgins boat. . . perhaps the same personnel I provided CAP for just two weeks earlier. The P-39 pilot, Lieutenant Roy F. Fowler, Jr., USAAF, (who got in on the tail end of this battle from Vella Lavella CAP) was rescued by natives and ferried by canoe to Vella Lavella where we joined each other in the Sick Bay. He suffered a broken leg caused by striking the tail section during bail out. The next day we were put aboard an LST and returned to Guadalcanal. (36:23; 40:1-2; 43:--)

Other VMF 124 pilots also had good hunting that mission. Captains William E. Crowe and Louis R. Smunk, and Lieutenants William J. Bedford and William P. Spencer, each shot down a Zero in the Kahili - Shortlands - Fauro area. The war diary also notes that Lieutenant "Mickey" Finn had the left elevator of his Corsair torn off in a collision with a Zero--that combat must have been in very close quarters! (31:33)

The month of August closed with patrols, scrambles, and alerts from Munda. First Lieutenant George E. Moore was credited with a probable Zeke shot down. The war diary closed August with the following report:

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Enemy Aircraft Destroyed During Month: | 38 |
| Our Combat Losses (Pilots): | 0 |
| Our Operational Losses (Pilots): | 1 (31:34) |

September began with a day of routine missions (from Guadalcanal) for the squadron. The war diary notes that Lieutenant Walsh returned from Vella Lavella in an LST. (He had been shot down during combat action the day before.) On 2 September, the squadron flew another bomber escort mission to Kahili. The war diary notes that a Major Yost, USMC, and a Major Bechtol, USAAF, flew on this mission as part of VMF 124's flight. Major Bechtol was credited with shooting down one Zeke. While flying a test hop (typically flown after an engine change to check performance before engaging in combat) from Guadalcanal that afternoon, Captain William E. Cannon spotted a Betty off Rennell Island. He attacked, shooting the Betty down, which burned in the air and on the water, and sank. Captain Cannon provided a detailed account of that encounter:

I was putting some engine time on a plane that had just had an engine change. I went down to Bellona Island and flew around for a while looking the place over. I then headed for Rennell Island. Just as I reached it, I spotted a plane flying low (to the) northwest of me. I decided to investigate. As I turned toward the plane it turned away and headed northwest staying low and going under some scattered clouds. I began climbing and following the plane. As I got near, I pulled up into the sun about 2000 feet above the plane. I could see that it was a Betty but I waited until I could see the red balls on a white square on the side of the fuselage. The plane was about 50 or 100 feet above the water. I then made a high side pass firing from long range until I almost ran into him and pulled up. I noticed that his right engine was smoking slightly but he was still flying. I then made another pass from above and directly astern. This time only four guns fired. I pulled up as before and he was still flying when I looked down. I charged my guns and made another pass from the rear. . . this time only one gun fired. The right engine was still smoking, but he was still flying. I charged my guns again and made another pass with one gun. The smoke was getting darker and as I pulled away this time I saw flames shoot out the right side of the plane. Just

as the plane caught fire something went overboard and I could see it hit the water. There was a big fire on the water with black smoke rising high above it. I looked the area over but could not find what they had dropped. When I left, the plane was almost completely submerged in the water. I returned to the field and landed. When I sighted the Betty I radioed Gold Base but was unable to reach them and did not make contact until on my way home. (32:3, 3A)

During another bomber escort to Kahili on 3 September, Captain Wallace E. Sigler shot down one Zeke north of Vella Lavella. Captain Sigler's concise account expresses a matter of fact evaluation of the incident:

I and my wing man were weaving about 5,000 feet over the bombers. Zeros appeared to be bothering the last section. I circled and made an overhead on a small group of Zeros and shot down one, dispersing the group. He burst into flames and started falling toward the water. The Zeros did not attempt to follow the bombers further. (32:3, 3A)

The squadron flew bomber escort to Ballale Island on 4 September, had two scramble alerts and a test hop. Activities recorded for 5 September were limited to test hops. VMF 124's final day of combat action in the Solomons came with dawn on 6 September. The day included scramble alerts, task force cover missions, and a TBF escort mission to Morgusia Island. Approximately 15 - 20 Zeros were encountered near Morgusia, and Lieutenants Warren P. Nichols and George P. Moore were credited with shooting down three Zekes between them. Their accounts of the action:

Lieutenant Nichols' Account

Took off 1105 as medium cover for TBFs bombing Morgusia Island. Saw approximately 10 Zeros low over Fauro Island as TBFs peeled off. Zeros followed and began closing as bombers made a 360 degree rendezvous. I pulled over between the Zeros and Bougainville and made a long run from 10,000 feet. At about 4,000 [feet altitude] I fired at one but could not pull through for lead. Another pulled up right in front of me and I hit him with all I had. However, just as he started burning, five of my guns quit firing. Large bursts of fire appeared from the left side of the engine and I pulled above him as I passed. While climbing, I recharged my guns and looking over to the left, saw another Zeke trying to make a run on an F4U. I nosed over and for a moment he considered a head-on run, but evidently decided not, and in his bewilderment turned 180 degrees right in front of me. He perhaps thought I would over-run, but I throttled back and started firing (all six guns worked again). He started smoking, rolled on his back, and started down, although we were less than 500 feet high. I considered him a very certain probable and he was confirmed by

Hartsock, who told the Intelligence Officer he saw the plane go in. There was a cirrus cloud ceiling at 13,000 feet with scattered cumulus clouds below. Aerial bombs, of which I saw three, exploded at 7 to 8 thousand feet about 15 miles from the Shortlands. I could not tell where they were coming from. (32:4, 4A)

Lieutenant Moore's Account

We took off from the Russells at 1100 to escort TBFs to the Shortlands. After the TBFs had successfully hit the target area and while we were covering their rendezvous, a Zeke made a poor pass at us and I gave chase. The Zeke dove and pulled out to the north, and I pulled away to cover the bombers again. Another Zeke then pulled up in front of me and I fired a burst at very close range. He caught fire and rolled down toward the water. This took place about four or five miles southeast of Morgusia Island. I fired at the first Zeke, but could not observe any results. (32:4A)

On 7 September 1943, all VMF 124 flight echelon personnel departed Guadalcanal and the Solomons aboard a DC-3. They were headed for Espiritu Santo. The combat record for September, although covering just six days, is another record of success:

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Enemy Aircraft Destroyed During Month: | 7 |
| Our Combat Losses (Pilots): | 0 |
| Our Operational Losses (Pilots): | 0 (32:34) |

All VMF 124 personnel were located at Espiritu Santo by 11 September. On 12 September, First Lieutenants Warren P. Nichols, Julian Willcox, George E. Moore, and Harry A. Broadus (Squadron Intelligence Officer) departed by DC-3 for a rest and recreation trip to Sydney, Australia. They would be reassigned to new squadrons after their return to Espiritu Santo. On 20 September, all flight and ground echelon personnel (with the exception of the four officers at Sydney) sailed from Espiritu Santo aboard the U.S.S. *James H. McClintock*. Their destination--The United States of America. The warriors of VMF 124 had served their country and the cause of freedom well in the Solomons. It was time to head home and prepare for new challenges. (24:4-6; 32:5)

The squadron disembarked at San Francisco on 12 October 1943, and arrived at Camp Miramar, San Diego, California, on 13 October. VMF 124 was in "non-operating status" until it was broken up on 20 October. VMF 124 was soon reformed and deployed again to the Pacific, where it continued on in the proud tradition established by the first cadre of Corsair pilots in the Solomons. (24:5; 33:1)

THE RECORD

VMF 124 was credited with 69 Japanese aircraft destroyed in the air during the squadron's first trip overseas. This number includes one Zeke shot down by Major Bechtol, USAAF, who flew on a bomber escort mission with VMF 124 pilots on 2 September 1943. The record also cites 20 probables--aircraft believed to have been shot down, but not confirmed. In addition to their impressive air combat record, the pilots of VMF 124 strafed and sank a 1500-ton schooner and a number of enemy barges. They also destroyed enemy aircraft and targets of opportunity on the ground. The cost? VMF 124 lost seven pilots--three in combat and four operationally. Eleven Corsairs were lost in combat, and twenty one in operational mishaps. (24:5; 41:1) VMF 124 produced three fighter aces in the Corsair: Lieutenant Ken Walsh, with 20 victories; Captain William E. Crowe, with 7 victories; and, Lieutenant Howard J. "Mick" Finn, with 5 victories. (25:1-2)

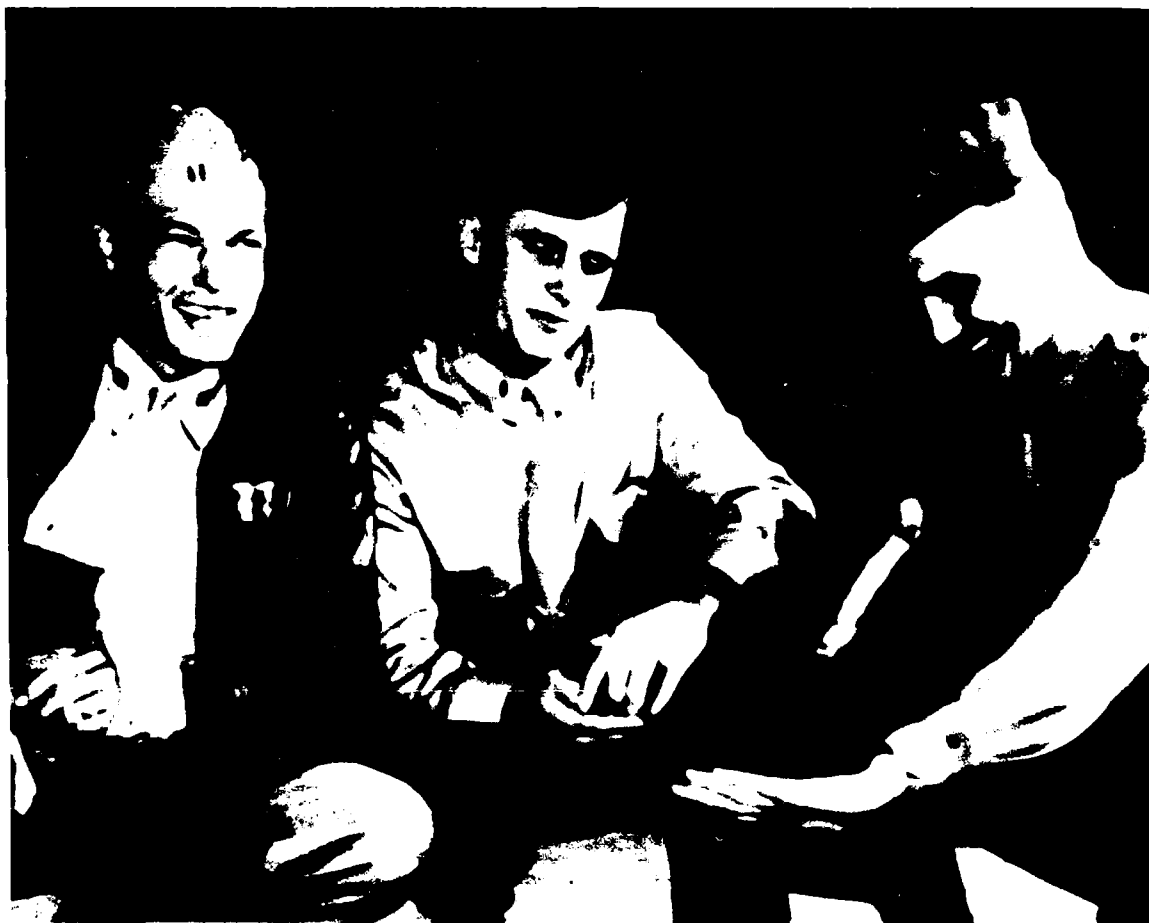


Figure 24. VMF 124 Aces--(Left to right) Capt Bill Crowe, Lt Ken Walsh, and Lt Howard "Mick" Finn--show how its done.
(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)

RECOGNITION

A complete list of awards presented to VMF 124 is very difficult to compile, since many pilots were transferred to other units and locations prior to receiving awards recognizing their actions in the Solomons. Although only a partial list of awards could be determined, it does provide the reader with some idea of squadron and individual honors. All participating pilots received the Asiatic Pacific medal with one star, for action in strikes against Bougainville, and another for operations in support of the landings at Vella Lavella. In addition, 33 individual medals and two letters of citation were presented to members of VMF 124. These awards included: One Congressional Medal of Honor, awarded to First Lieutenant Kenneth A. Walsh; one Purple Heart to First Lieutenant Howard J. Finn; and, one Silver Star to First Lieutenant Benjamin E. Dale, Jr., awarded by the Army for his participation in a strike with P-38s when he helped strafe and sink a Japanese DD. (24:5)

The Navy and Marine Corps Medal for Heroism was awarded to MSgt. James J. O'Reilly, USMC, for his action on Guadalcanal 11 February 1943, when he pulled wounded pilot Second Lieutenant R. J. Webster from his crashed and burning F4U-1 Corsair. (24:5-6)

President Franklin D. Roosevelt presented the Congressional Medal of Honor to First Lieutenant Kenneth A. Walsh, at the White House on 8 February 1944, for his actions on 15 and 30 August, 1943. The citation reads:

For extraordinary heroism and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty as a pilot in Marine Fighting Squadron ONE TWENTY-FOUR in aerial combat against the enemy Japanese forces in the Solomon Islands Area. Determined to thwart the enemy's attempt to bomb Allied ground forces and shipping at Vella Lavella on August 15, 1943, First Lieutenant Walsh repeatedly dived his plane into an enemy formation outnumbering his own division six-to-one and, although his plane was hit numerous times, shot down two Japanese dive bombers and one fighter. After developing engine trouble on August 30 during a vital escort mission, First Lieutenant Walsh landed his mechanically disabled plane at Munda, quickly replaced it with another and proceeded to rejoin his flight over Kahili. Separated from his escort group when he encountered approximately fifty Japanese Zeros, he unhesitatingly attacked, striking with relentless fury in his lone battle against a powerful force. He destroyed four hostile fighters before cannon shellfire forced him to make a dead-stick landing off Vella Lavella where he was later picked up. His valiant leadership and his daring skill as a flier have been a source of confidence and inspiration to his fellow pilots and reflect the highest credit upon the United States Naval Service. (22:1)



Figure 25. Lt Kenneth A. Walsh is awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Roosevelt, at the White House, 8 February 1944. Lt Walsh's wife Beulah, USMC General A. A. Vandegrift, and Admiral E. King attended the presentation. (Photo courtesy of Perry Coley and Ken Walsh)

There are many names and awards not included in this summary, but all those who served with VMF 124 in the Solomons certainly merit our respect and appreciation for their courage, commitment and sacrifice. When asked (years after the Solomons campaign was over) if he could cite any "unsung heroes" in VMF 124, Lieutenant Colonel Ken Walsh, USMC, (Retired), a great fighter ace and American hero himself, responded, "As for unsung heroes. . . it may sound prosaic, but they were the ground personnel, those who enabled us to do the job without the opportunity of seeing the aircraft perform in combat." (38:1) Throughout seven months of aerial combat, the warriors of VMF 124 spearheaded a critical Allied drive against the enemy, writing an epic of courage and victory in the skies above the Solomons.



Figure 26. VMF 124's "C" Flight at Guadalcanal,
August 1943. Clockwise from top left:
Capt Quilty, Lt Langer, Capt Pearson, Lt Moore.
(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)



Figure 27. VMF 124's "E" Flight at Guadalcanal,
August 1943. Clockwise from top left:
Lt Johnston, Lt Walsh, Capt Raymond, Lt Willcox.
(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)

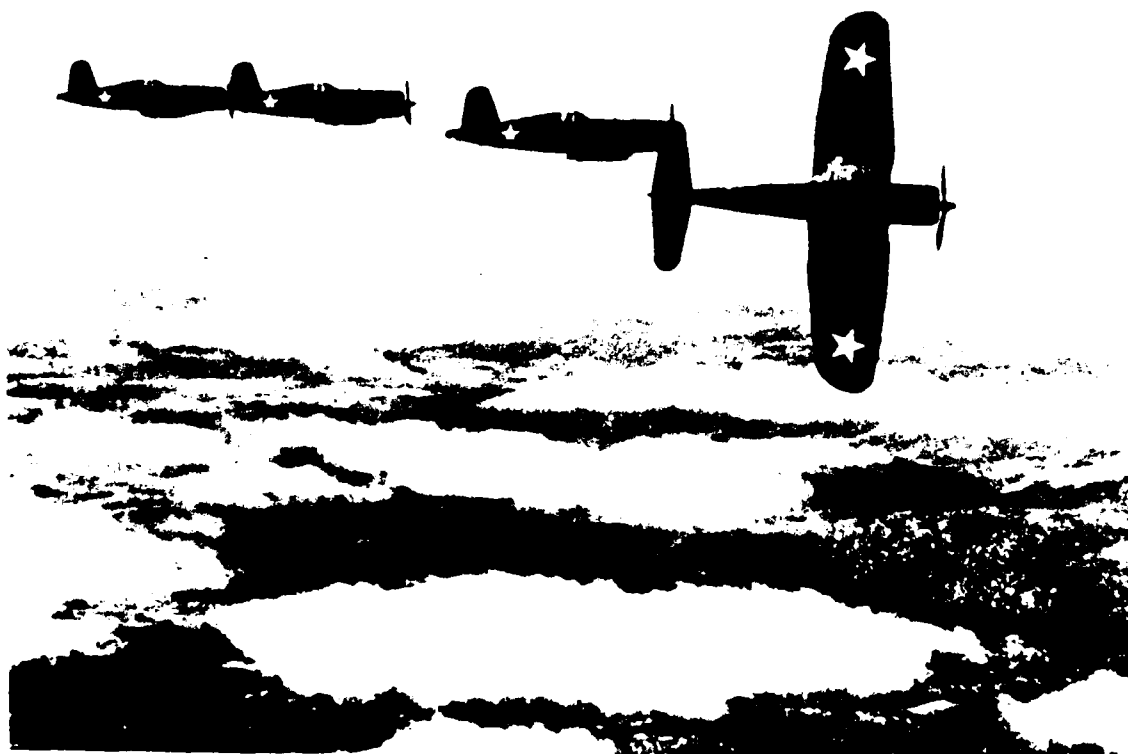


Figure 28. Air superiority over the Solomons--F4U Corsairs on patrol.
(Photo courtesy of Perry Coley)

Chapter Four

THE F4U CORSAIR--"WHISTLING DEATH"

A GREAT BIRD OF PREY

"Like all great birds of prey, the F4U-1 [attained]. . . success under adverse conditions. It would challenge an experienced enemy who had been on the offensive since December 7, 1941. It would make its debut at Guadalcanal February 12, 1943. And, from there, this fighter would take the offensive to the very heart of Japan." (44:1) Those words were written by Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Lieutenant Colonel Ken Walsh, USMC, (Retired), who flew the Corsair to 21 aerial combat victories over Japanese aviators in the Pacific. (16:108; 22:--; 25:2)

Colonel Walsh's comparison of the F4U-1 to "a great bird of prey," is one of several names and images that aptly portray the aircraft considered by many to be "the finest propeller-driven combat airplane" ever produced. (1:8) The designation "F4U-1," identifies the airplane as: "F"--a fighter, "4"--the fourth model number, "U"--manufactured by Chance-Vought, and, "1"--the first modification. (23:50-51) The word "Corsair" is derived from the Latin word for "running swiftly," and means "a privateer, a pirate or pirate ship." (4:319) The Corsair could move very swiftly indeed--it set a world speed record of 405 miles per hour in October, 1940, and was the fastest fighter aircraft in the Pacific. (17:4-5) The Japanese who faced the Corsair would concur that it was a very effective "privateer or pirate ship," as it raided and plundered Japanese shipping, land bases, and air forces. The Corsair's inverted gull wings were the origin of one of its nicknames, "The Bent-Wing Bird." (1:19) The Japanese had their own name for the Corsair. All F4Us had wing root inlets that whistled with an unmistakable, sharp sound as the Corsair dove to attack. (1:19) The Japanese who survived the experience of hearing the whistle made by an attacking Corsair quickly gave it their own name--"The Whistling Death." (1:19)

IRONING OUT THE BUGS

Although the Corsair would rapidly become the most potent air supremacy weapon in the Pacific, there were a number of modifications to be made and "bugs to iron out," before and during the combat tours in the Solomons. There was very little time for operational development of



Figure 29. The first production F4U--first flight 25 June 1942.
Note wing root inlets which gave Corsair the nickname,
"Whistling Death."

(U.S. National Archives photo)

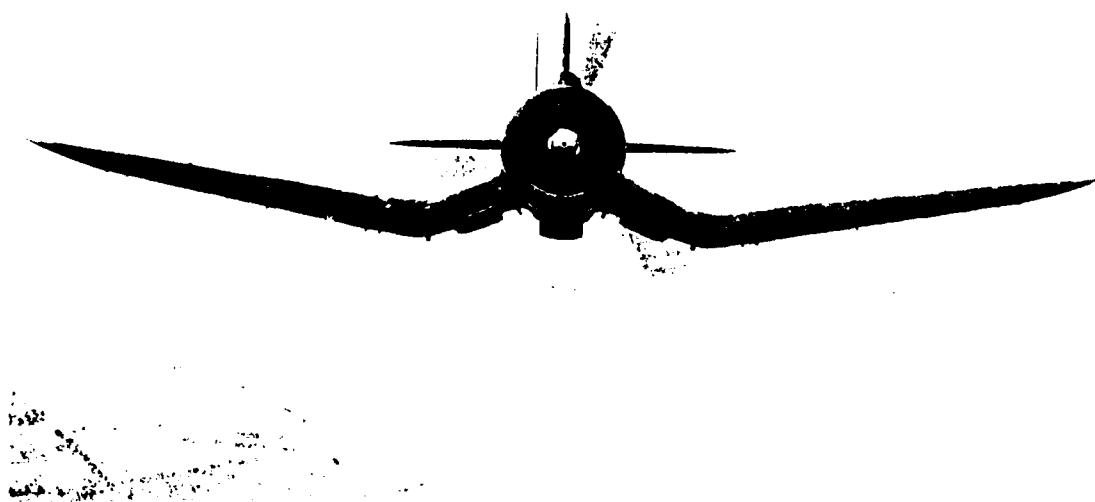


Figure 30. Corsair silhouette--head on, showing
inverted gull wing.

(U.S. National Archives photo)

the Corsair before it was urgently needed in the war, so most of the required modifications would not be identified and accomplished until the Corsair was actually in combat. However, several key modifications were made at Espiritu Santo, just prior to entering combat at Guadalcanal. A very bad radio reception noise problem (caused by ignition interference), and a critical problem with the ignition system at high altitude (the ignition system would fail above 29,000 feet as a result of inadequate pressurization) were both corrected. The latter problem was identified during a near fatal flight at high altitude by Walsh (summarized in Chapter Two). Inadequate pressurization to the distributors resulted in complete engine failure; this was overcome by adding an air pump to each distributor housing. The result was excellent performance at altitudes up to 35,000 feet. (44:1)

Although some problems were fixed before Guadalcanal, those "that demanded more time would simply have to wait. . . for example: the low tail wheel and the so-called 'birdcage canopy'." (44:1) Former VMF 124 fighter ace, Colonel Howard J. "Mick" Finn, USMCR, (Retired), recalled hearing that 111 changes or modifications were made to the Corsair during VMF 124's seven months of combat in the Solomons. (34:3) A Vought factory technical representative (Mr. Malcolm Raffo) accompanied the squadron to Guadalcanal to assist with maintenance and help with modifications. As a result, the factory made numerous changes to improve the Corsair, including: changes to the canopy to improve visibility; changed the rear tail wheel strut length to improve the attitude of the airplane; changed the cowl flap hydraulic system, which originally leaked hydraulic fluid on to the windscreen; changed wing spoilers to increase spoiler board stability; and, other modifications. (18:12; 24:4; 34:3; 35:4) Colonel Finn recalls that some of these modifications appeared on replacement Corsairs before VMF 124 completed its combat tour. (34:3) "Field modifications" made by the resourceful men of VMF 124 to maximize Corsair performance included removing all unnecessary weight from the fighter--such as the tail hook (installed for carrier landings), and the wing fuel tank carbon dioxide purging bottles. (16:89)

FIREPOWER

The "teeth" of "The Whistling Death" were its guns. Colonel Walsh summarizes the Corsair's armament from a user's perspective:

The firepower of the F4U-1 was superior to that of the "Zeke" and "Hamp" [two types of Zeros]--the only Zero fighters I encountered. Where the Zero employed four guns (two 7.7mm and two 20mm), we employed six guns (.50 caliber). We loaded our ammunition belts (400 rounds per gun, [for] a total of 2400) consecutively with one tracer, one armor-piercing and one incendiary; a mere two second burst of fire would expend approximately 150 rounds--more than enough for a Zero. Later, different models of the F4U varied the armament, some would

include the 20mm. But I preferred the six .50 caliber guns throughout the war. (44:2)

Colonel Walsh said the munitions on the Corsair were very effective against the lightly armored Zero--once you hit the Zero, it was probably going down. (42:--). Although not a weapon in itself, the heavy armor on the Corsair made it a very rugged bird and enhanced its capability against the enemy. One of the original VMF 124 pilots who flew combat in the Solomons, Colonel Edmond P. Hartsock, USMCR, (Retired), commented on the importance of the Corsair's armor in comparison to the Zero. He said the Corsair was a ". . . rugged aircraft. We got shot up alot but not down. Japanese aircraft would blow up readily." (35:3)

MATCH UP WITH THE ZERO AND OTHER FIGHTERS

"The Japanese began the war with the best carrier fighter in the world, the Zero, which surprised U.S. fighter pilots with its speed, maneuverability and overall performance. . . it could out perform the best land-based U.S. fighters." (16:xvii) The Japanese held that advantage until 12 February 1943--the day the first Corsairs arrived at Guadalcanal. (1:22)

Although the Japanese fighter pilots would not have the opportunity to test their Zeros against this new adversary until February, the Corsair tested its capabilities against those of the Zero a month earlier. This unusual situation resulted from American acquisition of a captured Zero, which had participated in an attack on Unalaska Island in the Aleutians on 4 June 1942. A lucky shot by a PBY Catalina resulted in a single bullet severing the Zero's oil pressure gauge indicator line. The pilot believed he was out of oil and attempted a wheels down landing on nearby Akutan Island; the Zero's wheels caught in a bog and flipped the plane over on its back, killing the pilot. The aircraft was recovered by a U.S. Navy team one month later. The Zero was repaired and used in practice air combat against U.S. fighters. (1:27; 10:109-111; 19:170)

The Corsair was tested against the captured Zero in January 1943, at Naval Air Station, North Island, San Diego. (1:27) "The Corsair proved itself definitely superior." (1:26) The Corsair was faster, had greater range, and was much better armored than the Zero. The Zero was more agile and maneuverable than the Corsair. (19:170) In addition, the Corsair was tested against the best of the American fighters. The results were very impressive: ". . . in combat practice with the P-51, the Corsair consistently outfought its 'opponent' above 12,000 feet and was considered evenly matched below that altitude. Dogfights were held with the P-47 Thunderbolt, P-51 Mustang, P-38 Lightning, and P-39 Airacobra Army fighters, all with favorable results." (1:27) Writing of the Corsair in the Foreword to Barrett Tillman's, Corsair: The F4U in World War II and Korea, Lieutenant Colonel Ken Walsh, USMC, (Retired), said:

. . . it challenged the enemy in air combat: intercept, bomber escort, and fighter sweeps. The F4U was a formidable weapon, and its six .50 caliber guns with the Mark 8 gunsight did the job! The trigger was literally at the pilot's fingertip, and another switch on the console recharged the guns hydraulically. A mere two second burst would fire approximately 150 rounds.
(18:1x)

| <u>Characteristic</u> | <u>Corsair</u> | <u>Zero</u> |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Span | 41 ft | 39.3 ft |
| Length | 33.3 ft | 29.8 ft |
| Height | 16.1 ft | 11.5 ft |
| Wing Area | 314 sq ft | 241.5 sq ft |
| Empty Weight | 8982 lbs | 4107 lbs |
| Loaded Weight | 14000 lbs | 5906 lbs |
| Maximum Speed | 417 mph | 336 mph |
| Cruise Speed | 182 mph | 220 mph |
| Powerplant | 2000 hp | 1130 hp |
| Armament | Six .50 cal machine guns | Two 20mm cannon and two 7.7mm machine guns |

Table 1: Corsair and Zero match up. (19:170)

"The Corsair was faster than the Zero in level fight, and could--like most American fighters--outdive the Zero. The Corsair was powered by a Pratt and Whitney 2,000 horsepower, air cooled, 'Double Wasp' radial engine, the most powerful fighter engine in use at that period of the war." (16:89) In his book Samurai, World War II Japanese fighter pilot Saburo Sakai said of the Corsair: "No less troublesome was the Corsair, a powerful gull-winged American Navy fighter which operated mostly from land bases. Not as maneuverable as the Hellcat, the Corsair nevertheless was much faster than the Zero and had tremendous diving speed." (14:336) In addition to Saburo Sakai's assessment, the Japanese authors of Zero, Masatake Okumiya and Jiro Horikoshi (who designed the Zero), said the following about the Corsair:

The first single-engine American fighter seriously to challenge the Zero was the Chance-Vought F4U Corsair. . . in a short time the excellent qualities of the Corsair became only too evident, and the enemy rapidly increased the Corsair fighter strength in the Solomons campaign; the strongest increase was noted about February of 1943 [when the first squadron of Corsairs arrived at Guadalcanal!], when we withdrew from Guadalcanal Island. Faster than the Zero in level flight and capable of infinitely greater diving speeds, the Corsairs soon proved to be a great

nuisance to our fighters. . . as the total number of Corsairs increased. . . the outnumbered Zeros ran into serious trouble, and the Japanese fighter commands were soon faced with serious losses inflicted by the speedy American. . . fighters. The Corsair was the first single-engine fighter which clearly surpassed the Zero in performance." (11:221-3)

In general, "Japanese officers interrogated after the war said they considered the Corsair the best fighter the US had in the Pacific." (1:23) Colonel Edmond P. Hartsock, USMCR, (Retired), wrote a very succinct evaluation of flying the Corsair in combat against the Zero: "1. Faster; 2. Not nearly as maneuverable; 3. Rugged; 4. Well armored. Overall, one of the war's great aircraft!" (35:3) The Corsair was clearly a fighter pilot's dream come true, a nightmare for the enemy, and a powerful new player in the Pacific air war.

Chapter Five

THE WARRIORS--TRAINING AND TACTICS

IT TAKES MORE THAN JUST A GREAT AIRPLANE

The Corsair was clearly the right weapon to take the air war to the Japanese and win air superiority. However, even with its superior performance capabilities, the Corsair by itself, was just a machine. It required a skilled warrior to pilot it to victory. Colonel Walsh expressed this reality, when he wrote:

With the Corsair I had confidence in meeting the Zero and for the most part sensed and felt an advantage. Still, the combination of aircraft *and individual pilot skill* [italics are author's], in many instances was the determining factor. In some cases I experienced a decided advantage over my victim; in others, I met my equal and considered myself fortunate in surviving the battle; and alas, I met the man who shot me down. (40:2)

Pilot skill takes time and practice to develop, but the pilots of VMF 124 did not have much time to train and develop their skills in the Corsair prior to combat. The average age of the pilots was 22 years; total flight time in the Corsair averaged less than 30 hours per pilot. (24:1; 35:1) The squadron, as a whole, and each pilot, as an individual, would have to apply sound combat tactics to help cover for the lack of pilot experience.

INITIAL TRAINING

While at Camp Kearney, pilot training consisted of formation flying and familiarization with the Thach Weave. (Although often written as the "Thatch" Weave, "Thach" is the correct spelling.) The squadron tactics were to fly in a four-ship flight, divided in two sections of two planes, and use the Thach Weave. (34:2) The Thach Weave was named after Navy Commander Jimmy Thach, and "proved a highly effective defense in fighter combat. The weave featured a constant crisscross of two fighters, each capable of eliminating an enemy on the other's tail in the crossover." (16:xviii) Just three months after their first flight in the Corsair, the pilots of VMF 124 would test their training and tactics in the crucible of combat fire in the Solomons.

SKILL AND TACTICS OF THE ENEMY

Colonel Finn recalled their first combat encounters with a highly skilled enemy fighter force: "When we first arrived at Guadalcanal, the skill of the Japanese pilot was impressive--even scary. The fighters could do aerobics that would make you dizzy--but seldom a coordinated attack." (34:2) Colonel Hartsock echoed the assessment of his old squadron mate, saying, "Early in the Guadalcanal Campaign Japanese pilots were far superior to ours." (35:1) The first missions for VMF 124 included bomber escort to heavily defended enemy positions. The Corsair pilots rapidly learned the enemy's strengths and tactics:

On bomber escort missions, we would be greatly outnumbered, with Japanese fighters above, below, on each side, and even out front. Except for the occasional "pigeon," with several Zeros waiting to "pounce" if someone would "bite," most all attacks were made by individual Japanese aircraft. . . later in our combat tour, the abilities of the Japanese pilots were not nearly as impressive. On numerous occasions, we could turn the Corsair inside the turning radius of the Zero. That seldom happened early in our tour. (34:2-3)

The advantage initially enjoyed by the Japanese in the Pacific air war was overcome by dedicated American aviators flying improved fighters. This was seen clearly by Japanese military leaders and pilots. In The Divine Wind, Rikihei Inoguchi and Tadashi Nakajima discuss the impact the new F4U and other fighters had on the outcome of the Pacific War:

Our naval air forces, which at the beginning of the Pacific War boasted absolute mastery of the air in all theaters of battle, found that from the middle of 1943 their Zeros were inferior to the new F6Fs, F4Us, and P-38s from the United States. As a result, lacking even minimum requirements of pilots and materiel, our air forces suddenly found themselves fighting against impossible odds. Not only was there no better plane to replace the Zero, but the supply even of Zeros was insufficient to fill half the requirements of the fighting fronts. The gradual retreat of our forces from the Solomons, followed by the loss of the Gilbert and Marshall Islands and the eventual withdrawal of our naval forces from Rabaul itself, had all resulted, in the final analysis, from the inability of our air strength to hold its own against the enemy. (7:24)

VMF 124 TACTICS

Very significant lessons were learned from the flight tests conducted against the captured Japanese Zero (mentioned in Chapter Four). The results of those tests helped Corsair pilots formulate their

tactics against the Zero. Colonel Walsh recalls the importance of what was learned during those tests:

Another briefing we had before leaving Stateside was by Commander Joe Clifton, USN, who had the unique experience of evaluating the F4U-1 against the Zero. . . in flight tests conducted at Naval Air Station, North Island, San Diego. . . . This particular Zero was salvaged from the Aleutians virtually undamaged and shipped to North Island for evaluation commencing about August 1942. We learned that the Zero could not follow the Corsair in a hard turn to the right in excess of 240 knots, and, in fact could not roll with the F4U at high speeds. This information was indeed most significant. As it was, the F4U was faster in level flight, could outclimb (in distance) and outdive the Zero. But, the maneuverability of the Zero was deadly, and in the vernacular, it had to be "boxed," not "slugged-out" with. Of course, either fighter had the initial advantage with altitude. (44:1-2)

Applying those lessons learned and resulting tactics to combat, Colonel Walsh made the following observations:

Altitude was paramount, and whoever had it dictated the terms of the fight. In this respect, the contest was seldom a matter of endurance. During a melee over the Russells, I suddenly found myself abeam of a Zero at approximately the same altitude, airspeed and heading. As I turned for an attack, he executed a barrel roll and smartly placed himself within firing range and position about 500 feet off my tail. His maneuver was executed with such rapidity and finesse that I felt stunned. There was only one means of escape, if I could make it: I made a split-S with full power followed by a very hard turn to the right. He couldn't follow me. (44:2)

Colonel Finn emphasized the importance of the Thach Weave, and flight and section integrity during combat:

I believe the Thach Weave was a good tactic against the Zero. Usually, flight integrity was lost soon after a dogfight began. However, those flights that could stay together longest suffered fewer casualties. The Crowe Flight ("D" Flight, led by Captain William E. Crowe) practiced it constantly, and we all survived. . . flight integrity was stressed, and above all, section integrity was a MUST. (34:2)

Colonel Walsh gives much credit for his success and survival to those who flew with him, especially his wingman. An article entitled, "Heroes of the Washington Area," published in the 2 January 1944 issue of the Washington, D.C., The Sunday Star, shows the credit Walsh gave his fellow combat aviators:



Figure 31. VMF 124's "D" Flight at Guadalcanal,
August 1943. Clockwise from top left:
Capt Crowe, Lt Mutz, Lt Finn, Lt Nichols.
(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)

And for that success--and the fact that he can hope for more-- Lt Walsh gives a lot of credit to men who have flown with him and more than once probably pulled him through in an unequal fight. As his rescuer on several occasions, he has special praise for Lt Bill Johnston of Birmingham, Ala. Flying as his wingman, it has been Bill who has picked off the Zero in a tail sneak on Lt Walsh's plane that might have been just too bad.
(21:1)



Figure 32. The key to success and survival--a great wingman! Lieutenant Bill Johnston, Ken Walsh's wingman.
(Photo courtesy of Ken Walsh)

Colonel Hartsock also stressed the importance of trying to start with an altitude advantage, and following the basic flight and section formations. He adds a description on how to escape when a Zero was behind you: "When a Zero got on your tail, we dove straight down if high enough and when attaining 300 knots, executed a hard right 180 degree roll and pull through--Zero couldn't follow you and hopefully we could end up above him." (35:2)

The pilots of VMF 124 modified and improved their tactics as they gained combat experience. (35:2) They began relatively "green," in the words of Colonel Hartsock, but the war diaries, combat records, and individual accounts of their combat actions, record their rapid development into highly skilled and daring warriors of the sky. Shortly after the end of World War II, General A. A. Vandegrift (later, Commandant of the USMC), said:

. . . Marine Aviation is best known for the . . . gallant fliers and ground crews, who, at Guadalcanal matched their blood, nerve, and skill in an unequal battle for air supremacy in the skies over the Solomons. Like their fellow Marines in the jungle foxholes, the flying Leathernecks of Guadalcanal held and won against almost overwhelming odds. (2:x1)

Chapter Six

LESSONS FROM WINNERS

FACTORS IN SUCCESS

"The Japanese won their opening victories in World War II largely through superior air power. . . it was not until World War II that fighter pilots played such an important and sometimes decisive role in the outcome of land and sea battles." (16:xix) The air power wielded by fighter pilots was indeed critical to the war in the Pacific. At the outset of the war, the Japanese Zero, "the best carrier fighter in the world," (16:xv) controlled the Pacific skies. Highly experienced Japanese aces, claiming many American and Allied kills, were dominating the air and leading the Japanese offensive through the Pacific. (16:xvi) On 12 February 1943, a new contender entered the fray--Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 124--a squadron of brave, young United States Marine Corps fighter pilots, flying the new F4U Corsair. There is no doubt that the performance capabilities of the Corsair were a significant factor in the combat success of VMF 124. However, the airplane could not fly itself, and many Japanese fighter pilots were extremely skilled and accomplished when VMF 124 entered the air battle. The author believes the performance of the Corsair is just one of several reasons for VMF 124's success. Other important reasons provide valuable lessons learned for consideration and potential application today.

The author asked some original members of VMF 124 for their opinions concerning squadron success in the Solomons. Perhaps predictably, the first factor mentioned was the F4U itself. Its speed, firepower, armor, and general rugged nature were key in establishing superiority over the Zero. This excellent fighter airplane was complemented by other important factors that contributed to success: (1) sound and effective squadron doctrine, which stressed flight and section integrity; and, (2) the Thach Weave. These tactics helped protect each pilot and his Corsair from attacking Zeros. They also felt that (3) rapid acquisition of pilot experience was a big factor in their success; and, very important: (4) an effective squadron rotation system which allowed the combat pilots to enjoy periodic rest and relaxation in safe locations away from the battle area. Another key factor identified was (5) the intense "will to win" the war. (34:1-2; 35:1) Each of these factors provides important lessons learned.

LESSONS LEARNED

Perhaps the most fundamental lesson we should learn from the Pacific air war is stated by author Martin Caidin, in his preface to Zero!:

No one can deny that during those long and dreary months after Pearl Harbor the Japanese humiliated us in the Pacific. We were astonished--fatally so--at the unexpected quality of the Japanese equipment. Because we committed the unforgivable error of underestimating a potential enemy, our antiquated planes fell like flies before Japan's agile Zero fighter.
(11:11)

Conversely, as the war progressed, we developed and employed aircraft superior to those of the Japanese, turning the air war completely around in our favor. We entered the war with a severe disadvantage in fighter aircraft performance and technology, and paid the bitter price. Almost immediately after we introduced a fighter with superior performance and technology, the air war turned to our advantage. This is a critical lesson for us today, especially in light of rapidly expanding technological and developmental breakthroughs. There are other lessons we should consider relative to VMF 124's combat experience and success in the Solomons. The more basic lessons include:

1. Superior technology can be a critical factor in battle.
2. Intelligence concerning enemy weapon systems can be very valuable in tactics development, as demonstrated by information learned from testing the captured Zero in January 1943. Japanese aviation experts attached "a great deal of importance to the fact that the United States got a Zero early on in the war and could. . . find out what its foibles in the air were." (10:111)
3. Sound and effective doctrine, which includes the flexibility for updating and change, is a necessary foundation for development of tactics.
4. Tactics should be developed to include the specific type of threat or challenge faced.
5. The tactics must be trained, practiced, and applied with discipline, especially in multiple ship formations.
6. Combat pilots should be rotated for rest and relaxation to alleviate the effects (potentially fatal) of battle fatigue. The Americans did this; the Japanese did not.
7. A focused "will to win" can help provide an "edge," or advantage--especially in a lengthy campaign.

A new squadron of courageous young Marine fighter pilots, flying a brand new airplane in mortal combat with the enemy, helped turn the tide of the war in the Pacific. The warriors of Marine Fighter Squadron 124 flew and fought with skill and daring during one of the most bitter air campaigns in history. They earned immortality in the annals of air combat, and more importantly, in the hearts and minds of those who follow.

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41. Walsh, Kenneth A., Lieutenant Colonel, USMC, Ret. Letter to Mr. Thomas R. Mutz, 22 February 1983.
42. Walsh, Kenneth A., Lieutenant Colonel, USMC, Ret. Personal interview with author, 21 January 1988.
43. Walsh, Kenneth A., Lieutenant Colonel, USMC, Ret. Telephone interviews with author, January 1988.
44. Walsh, Kenneth A., Lieutenant Colonel, USMC, Ret.
"The F4U Corsair." (Two page typed summary of Col Walsh's experiences and evaluation of the F4U, written following the end of World War II.)

B. RELATED SOURCES

Books

- Lord, Walter. Lonely Vigil: Coastwatchers of the Solomons. New York: The Viking Press, 1977.
- Rentz, John M. Bougainville and the Northern Solomons. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948.

APPENDIX

VMF 124 PILOTS AND VICTORY RECORD, INDICATING ACES AND LOSSES

| <u>NAME</u> | <u>VICTORIES</u> | <u>COMMENTS</u> |
|-------------------|------------------|--|
| Bedford, W. J. | 3 | |
| Brewer, C. B. | 1 | |
| Cannon, W. E. | 4 | |
| Crowe, W. E. | 7 | Ace |
| Dale, B. E. | | |
| English, J. | 1 | |
| Finn, H. J. | 5 | Ace |
| Franklin, W. A. | | Killed in landing crash, 27 Feb 43 |
| Gately, R. L. | | Killed in mid-air collision, 27 Feb 43 |
| Gise, W. E. | 1 | Killed in action, 13 May 43 |
| Harter, H. H. | 1 | Killed on takeoff 24 Aug 43 |
| Hartsock, E. P. | 2 | |
| Hurst, J. D. | | |
| Johnston, W. M. | 3 | Injured and evacuated 15 Aug 43 |
| Kaseman, G. W. | | |
| Kuhn, J. G. | 1 | Injured and evacuated 30 Aug 43 |
| Langer, L. | | Killed August 43 |
| Lyon, G. L. | 1 | Killed in action, 14 Feb 43 |
| McDowell, D. C. | 1 | |
| Millington, M. A. | 1 | |
| Moore, G. E. | 1 | |
| Mutz, T. R. | 3 | |
| Nichols, W. P. | 3 | |
| Pearson, L. B. | | |
| Quilty, J. F. | 1 | |
| Raber, A. R. | | |
| Raymond, D. B. | 2 | |
| Rood, G. B. | | |
| Shelton, T. M. | 3 | |
| Sigler, W. E. | 2 1/3 | |
| Smunk, L. R. | 1 1/3 | |
| Spencer, S. P. | 1/3 | |
| Spencer, W. P. | 1 | |
| Stewart, H. R. | | Killed in action, 14 Feb 43 |
| Webster, R. J. | | |
| Taylor, M. L. | | |
| Willcox, J. | | |
| Walsh, K. A. | 20 | First Corsair Ace; Medal of Honor |

NOTE: This list was compiled from VMF 124 Combat Records, and includes all names found in those documents. The list includes original cadre and later additions to the squadron, up through 7 September 1943

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